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illustrator

The **FRUIT** of EVOLUTION

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Before I knew it,
my life had it made!



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Saria
Kaiser Kong

Altria
Grem
Adventurer

Lulune
Donkey

Origa
Former
Assasin

Karen
Kannazuki
Former
Student Council
President

"I must be dreaming!"

Beatrice Lognar
Teacher

Agnos Pashen
Class F

"N-No way!
I mean... Shit!
I can use magic?
Me?!"







Rachel
Matten.....
Class F

"Maybe
you should
try to be
more
normal~?"

"That was
as ridiculous
as always,
Sensei."

Helen
Rosa.....
Class F

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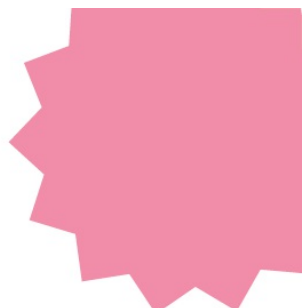
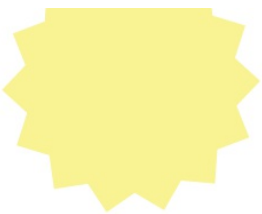
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THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 6

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅



Chapter 1: Karen Kannazuki and Seiichi Hiiragi

I, Karen Kannazuki, am in love.

When I was a little girl, I had short hair and was a bit of a tomboy; I would frequently save the other girls when they were bullied. As such, I became the target of all the local boys my age. They were too young to know or care about the immense power the Kannazuki Group wielded—not that I would use my family’s power to get my way, of course.

But one day, when I saved a young girl from bullies by taking her place, *he* appeared.

“You can’t beat up a girl!”

It was the man who would inevitably steal my heart—Seiichi Hiiragi-kun.

He was frequently bullied for his looks back then, much like in high school, but he had his parents’ moral support, and he was never the type to give in. Despite being a victim himself, he willingly stepped in to save me.

I didn’t even know his name back then. I had seen him getting picked on multiple times, but as I only intervened to help girls, I always pretended not to see him. Nonetheless, there he was, standing up for me.

Instantly, the bullies’ focus shifted to him.

“Gross!” one sneered. “Don’t talk to me, stupid!”

“What?!” he retorted. “Only stupid people call others stupid!”

“Shut up, ugly!”

“Only ugly people call others—wait, you got me there.”

He hadn’t changed a bit. His attitude was so natural that you’d think insults bounced right off him.

Everything changed when his parents died, but in those days, he had had their full attention—even though they were admittedly a little weird. He talked about them to me a lot, and they had to be the reason why no amount of bullying could break him.

The boys quickly surrounded and began to beat Seiichi-kun.

“Just die, crapface!”

“Ow! O-Ow!! Can’t we talk this out?!”

“Shut up!”

“Gwogh?!”

After a short while, he was limp and as battered as a discarded dish rag. That took me by surprise. I had always acted bravely toward bullies, but I was too scared of violence to stay strong when push came to shove.

Soon enough, the boys seemed to grow tired of pounding Seiichi-kun and wandered away. It was then that I could finally bring myself to stand, and I hurried to his side.

“A-Are you okay?!” I asked frantically.

“Hehe... I can see a biiig field of flowers.”

“Oh no! Somebody, please call an ambulance! Hurry!”

“I’m kidding! It was just a joke! Sorry!”

I blinked in shock. “Why would you joke about that?!”

He recoiled a little bit before replying, “Well... you were scared, right? I wanted to make you feel better.”

He’s honestly worried about me at a time like this?

He winced as he picked himself up off the ground.

“Why did you save me?” I asked. “This is the first you’ve made my acquaintance, isn’t it?”

“Acqua... Huh? I don’t get it. You know a lot of really big words.”

“Enough banter; just answer me.”

“You’re a girl, and you were in trouble. I had to save you,” he replied simply.

My jaw dropped. “Huh?”

“Dad told me to treat girls really well!” he boasted with a grin. “I agree with him.”

Nobody had ever treated me like a proper girl before. I could feel my face grow hot as I fumbled for a reply.

“R-Ridiculous. Do I look that frail or feminine?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. I think you’re kinda cute, though.”

I was *not* expecting that, and I could feel my blush intensify.

“A-A little blunt, aren’t you?”

“Mom said that if I didn’t say what’s on my mind, nobody’d ever know. She said hurting people was always bad, but if I wanted to compliment someone, I gotta say it!”

Seiichi-kun was a little famous in our community for being the bullies’ most popular target, so I had known he was around for some time now. After that, I made a point of stepping in to protest against his bullies, but that was only music to their sadistic ears. With time, even the other girls began to loathe him, despite doing nothing to deserve it. His chivalry disgusted them.

I was genuinely overjoyed. I had accompanied my father to his meetings often enough to be able to tell when someone was lying, and Seiichi-kun’s every word seemed genuine. More than that, though, his smile was blindingly pure.

Before long, I had taken to accompanying him on his crusades. Maybe I just felt bad about ignoring his suffering for so long at first, but before I knew it, he had become an irreplaceable part of my life. Through him, I got to know all his friends, from the cool and aloof Shouta to the then-crybaby Kenji. I finally—finally!—had friends my age, and it was all thanks to him. Without him, my life would have taken a very different course.

There was one incident that deepened my love for him. There was a global depression at the time, and only the Kannazuki Group seemed to be unaffected. A certain group decided that we had somehow stolen their jobs, and in an act of

revenge, they kidnapped me. I was with all my friends at the time, and they abducted almost everyone, but they abandoned Seiichi-kun at the scene for some reason.

The thugs seemed to only be after money, and they were rather generous in the way they treated us. They were hardly violent at all. Between the sudden emergency and the kidnappers' guns, however, Kenji was crying the entire time. Even Shouta was in tears out of fear. Collected as he was, he was still only a child. I had sworn to myself that I wouldn't shed a tear, but I was beside myself with unease.

Just as I was pining to be returned home, however, I heard a familiar voice.

"Heyyyy! Everybody, where are yooooooooou?!"

It was Seiichi-kun's voice. I had no idea how he did it, but he managed to track us to the criminals' lair.

The kidnappers came to the same conclusion, and leaving only a handful of men to watch us, they left the hideout to investigate. A few minutes later, they returned with young Seiichi-kun in tow.

"Hey, kid." One of them asked, "How'd you find us?"

"I heard it all from Karen-chan's dad!"

"Huh? Her dad?"

"Yep! He was talking about it on the phone!"

That was all it took for me to understand the situation. The kidnappers had called my father to demand the ransom money. He must have then used the Kannazuki Group's connections to pinpoint our location, and Seiichi was there to overhear. He was likely with my father from the beginning—he had been left behind to inform my father I was missing, and he stayed to collaborate on our rescue.

What was he thinking, coming all this way alone?

"Whatever." The kidnapper shrugged. "So? You wanna get tied up, too?"

"No! I'm here to save everyone!"

“Of all the dumb things to... Look, kid, we can’t just let ‘em go now.”

“I don’t care! Let them go!”

Then, of all things, he *jumped* at the man. He was far too small and weak to harm him, however, and a single kick sent him sprawling.

“Owf!”

“Look here, kid. This little brat’s dad ruined my life. I lost my job, my wife, and even my daughter. Get it? I worked my ass off for a little company, but they always treated me like I was worthless. Still, I kept my head down and worked hard. As long as I could help somebody somewhere down the line, I was happy. But then that shit-spewing Kannazuki Group stole all our work. The company fell apart like a house of cards; I could barely even feed myself, and my wife ran away with our kid. If that was it, fine—but my worthless former managers got hired by the Kannazukis, of all people, for stealing *my* hard work! How’s that fair? Where’s my reward? What happened to all *our* effort?! You’re just a snot-nosed brat who’s never worked a goddamn day in his life! How the hell could you know how we feel?!”

I saw the criminals around the leader nod sympathetically.

Shortsighted and naive, but not beyond understanding.

If everything the man said was true, then his grudge was with his former managers, not the Kannazuki Group—but they were beyond listening to reason. I couldn’t imagine such a naïve bunch being employed by my father either way.

Seiichi-kun, however, simply stumbled to his feet, wincing in pain.

“Shut UP!!”

Everyone froze. All eyes were instantly on him—he was *furious*.

“I’m happy that Mom gave birth to me, but... but look at me! Do you think I can have any dreams like this? Any plans? I’m fat, smelly, and ugly! I don’t wanna be fat, and I really don’t wanna be stinky! Do you know how much it sucks to be bullied for that?! You guys got married, right? You had jobs! You’re super lucky! All I can do is try to stay alive! I’m really scared of school, and I hate talking to everyone but Mom and Dad! Just going to school is really tough! But I

can't die—that'd make Mom and Dad sad. So, no matter how hard it gets, I'm gonna keep on living! You guys pretend that your lives suck, but you're super lucky! Don't you get it?!"

"B-But... you're just a kid—"

"So what?! Look at me! Am I gonna get more handsome later? You think I'll have a happy life somehow?!"

"..."

"I know I was kinda asking for it, but the silence hurts!"

The kidnappers were too flabbergasted to say anything. Every word Seiichi-kun said was another weight added onto their already heavy hearts. They had clearly had a rough time, but Seiichi-kun had been struggling against something far more oppressive for far longer. Each and every one of them pitied him.

"You've had it rough, huh, kid?"

"C'mon, cheer up. You never know what life has in store, y'know."

"Here, want some candy?"

Rather, they were actively trying to cheer him up.

Seiichi-kun wasn't especially smart, nor was he good at sports. Perhaps worst of all, a lot of first impressions hinged on one's appearance, and he was apparently hideous—though I found his round form to be quite loveable. He would have to be born again to grasp even the simplest of happy futures. Just as he said, his future was bleak.

"Sorry, kid. Looks like we really screwed up," the boss said ashamedly, "and, uh... You're not too hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine. I'm just glad nobody else got hurt... but next time, if you're feeling bad about hurting someone, you should say sorry."

"Y-Yeah... I guess you're right about that."

With that, we were all released, and the kidnappers readily turned themselves in.

Seiichi-kun had clearly worried about us a lot, but Shouta and the others weren't awake to see him—evidently, they had cried themselves asleep.

“Are you okay?!” Seiichi-kun rushed over to us. “You’re not hurt, right?”

“We’re fine. I see you’re just as impulsive as always, though.”

I flashed him a slightly strained smile.

He looked at me for a long moment before his face softened.

“That was pretty scary, huh? But you’re okay now.”

“But—”

He cut me off by wrapping his arms around me and patting my hair. “There, there.”

Something about his large body instantly put me at ease. Then, as if all the tension I was carrying was released at once, I began to bawl.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaahh! I-I was so scaaaared!
Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t know what was going to... Hic... I-I thought...”

“It’s okay. Everyone’s okay now.”

He kept stroking my hair in reassurance as I buried my face deep in his chest and inhaled lungful after lungful of his musk.

“Sniff... Your smell is—”

“Sorry! I reek, right? Sorry for hugging you!”

He tried to push me away, but I clung to him as tightly as I could.

“No. I love your smell.”

“Uh... Karen-chan? Is your nose okay?”

“How rude! You’re practically declaring yourself smelly.”

“Yeah... Man, I wanna cry now.”

Something about that playful exchange brought a smile to my face. It didn't matter how much everyone else seemed to hate him—he was the only person I could truly relax and be myself around. He alone could make me relax. It was then that it all finally clicked—I loved him. I wanted to be by his side forever.

As it happened, the kidnappers were never convicted. After my father heard the full story, he researched their former managers and realized everything the criminals had said was true. As such, he covered for the disgruntled workers and took them under his wing. The former managers were unceremoniously let go, and the kidnappers were hired by the Kannazuki Group, where they continue to work to this day.

The biggest surprise came when we first emerged from the hideout, however. The police had set up a perimeter around the building, but Father broke it himself by rushing up to me and tightly hugging me, much to my surprise. Little did Seiichi-kun know that Father felt quite indebted to him after that. Since we both knew that knowledge would only scare the poor boy, however, we kept it a secret.

To this day, whenever the kidnappers are asked about the incident, they always smile. *We were scolded by a kid who had it way worse than us*, they said. *Without him, we wouldn't be here today.*

In return, I wanted nothing more than to see him smile forevermore. That was what I swore in the same breath that I fell in love with him.

Chapter 2: Derision

The day after visiting the Academy Town, I picked Origa-chan up at the girls' dormitory and headed to the teachers' lounge. I was surprised to see that Beatrice-san was the only person there.

"Morning, Beatrice-san."

"Ah, good morning, Seiichi-san, Origa-chan."

"So, uh... Where are all the other teachers?"

"They headed to their respective classrooms some time ago now."

"Really?! I'm not late, right?"

I had checked and double-checked the time before leaving my room, so I couldn't imagine running so far behind.

Beatrice-san chuckled softly. "Don't worry. It's just that most classes are running special training sessions."

"Special training? What for?"

"It's a very busy time of year, you know. The closest event of note is the Clash of Classes, where each class competes for the title of the school's strongest. Everyone is quite determined to win this year."

"Wait, really?! Shouldn't we be training for that, too?!"

"Yes, but with your sudden arrival, I'm afraid I haven't had the time to prepare until now. My apologies."

"No, I should be the one apologizing! I had no idea you were so busy!"

"It's not your fault—we can safely say the headmaster is to blame."

She was smiling a little too pleasantly.

Sorry, Barney-san... I think you're gonna get another earful.

“But I agree,” she continued. “We’d best work hard to do as well as we can. Would you like to begin training tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah, I guess sooner is better for this kind of thing. Let’s do that.”

“I’ll inform the class during homeroom, then.”

With that, she began bundling papers scattered across her desk.

“Um... What’s that?” I asked.

“These? They’re homework printouts, specially compiled for each student in Class 2-F.”

“Huh?”

“As I mentioned, this is a very busy time of year. As soon as the Clash of Classes is over, midterm exams will begin.”

“But didn’t you give them answers just the other day?”

“That was for a test. Besides, Class F is full of... *unique* students, shall we say.”

Yeah... Agnos and Leon in particular are a handful, but I think they’re the only real problems. No, wait, I forgot about Saria and Lulune! They’ve never studied a day in their lives—literally! I hope Lulune doesn’t eat her homework or something...

“Wh-What about Saria and Lulune?” I asked hesitantly.

“Rest assured, they’ll be exempt from the coming exams. It wouldn’t be fair for them otherwise.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Wait, you said you have homework for everyone, right?”

“Yes. I compile printouts to address each of their specific strengths and weaknesses. It’s the same as always, really.”

“Wow...”

I was genuinely impressed she was putting that much work in. Even with a small class like ours, I couldn’t imagine any teacher back on Earth going to such lengths for their students.

Come to think of it, I've officially gone from taking tests to giving them. It's not like I'll be making them myself or anything, but I've gotta admit, I'm looking forward to watching the class squirm.

I didn't know what to do with that new, dark side of me, but fortunately, Beatrice-san finished gathering her things quickly enough.

"Sorry for making you wait. Now, let's head to class."

"All right!"

"Yeah," Origa-chan nodded.

I've gotta work hard enough to make all her effort worth it.

On the way to the classroom, however, a group of students and their teacher came down the hallway toward us, most likely having just finished their training. We moved to the side to let them pass, but for some reason, the other teacher stopped right in front of us.

The teacher had flowing ochre hair that fell loosely around his shoulders and eyes of the same color. I would've called him handsome if not for the shit-eating grin on his face. Blud and the other boys were just as attractive—but no, this man was also dripping with malice. He was wearing a flashy red cape, under which was some kind of military uniform.

Wait, I've seen that uniform somewhere... That's right, that eating contest in the café in Terbelle! The guy from the Kaizell Empire was wearing it, so does that mean this teacher's from Kaizell, too?

His smirk only deepened. "Well, look who it is! If it isn't poor Beatrice-sensei on her way to that worthless band of misfits she thinks so highly of!"

Ew. Who does this guy think he is?

"Good morning, Cliff-sensei," Beatrice-san replied stiffly. "I'd like to point out that none of my students are 'worthless,' and I'd be glad if you took your words back."

He didn't seem to notice her attitude, however, as he took another step closer to her. "What a headstrong little woman you are! I was only speaking the

truth. May as well call trash what it is. More importantly, I was wondering if you'd care to accompany me to dinner tonight."

"Absolutely not."

"Ah, I see how it is. Your little bunch of failures are secretly top students, is that it? I'm sure we'll all see their true worth soon enough, with the Clash of Classes and midterms fast approaching."

His class snickered behind him.

Beatrice-san told me about how badly she wanted to have lunch with another teacher, but I guess this guy only sees her as a woman. I mean, sure, she's beautiful, but she isn't into him at all, and this clearly isn't the first time she turned him down. I bet it's his craptastic personality.

To both of our horror, however, Cliff put a finger under her chin and forcibly directed her gaze up into his own.

Oh, I've seen that move before. I think it was pretty popular back on Earth.

"Soon you'll wake from your deluded slumber," he mused. "I'll have you seeing the truth soon—"

I couldn't take it any longer. I grabbed him by the wrist and pulled his hand away from Beatrice-san's face.

"Need a hand?" I asked her.

"S-Seiichi-san?!" she stammered in shock.

Cliff blinked in surprise for a moment, then turned to me with a scowl.

"What do you think you're doing? You would knowingly threaten violence on a Kaizellian noble?!"

"Uh, I don't know anything. I've never even seen you before."

Is he famous or something? And I guess I was right about him being from Kaizell. Anyhow...

"Do you need to touch her to have a conversation?" I asked him flatly.

"Pft." Beside me, Origa-chan was covering her mouth with both hands and trembling.

Cliff turned bright red with anger, but he quickly regained his haughty composure.

“Hmph. Perhaps I got ahead of myself. You, however, had best work on keeping that incorrigible jealousy in check. A hideous wretch like you has no right to lay eyes on me, let alone chastise me.”

“Pffft!” Origa-chan tried again to stifle her laughter, but it was painfully obvious.

“Uh, no?” I replied confusedly. “You were the one touching people for no reason. That’s on you.”

I’m not crazy, right? I mean, he practically pinned her to the wall and was messing with her chin in a weird way. That’s screwed up. I guess I could see Shouta or Blud pulling it off without being awkward, though.

“Anyway, no more weird chin stuff for you,” I continued with a nod.

“What?!”

By this point, Origa-chan was on the ground, practically in tears as she slapped the marble floor.

“I can’t... hold on...” she said through her chortling.

That’s a pretty cute reaction, but stop mocking the evil teacher, sweetie.

“What in blazes are you saying?!” Cliff retorted furiously. “Who do you think you are?!”

“If I may,” Beatrice-san cut in politely. “This is Seiichi-san, the new homeroom teacher for Class 2-F.”

“Oh? So, he’s the newcomer the headmaster mentioned?” He looked me over from head to toe before snorting derisively. “A street rat like you? My, how these once-great halls of education have fallen.”

Wait, street rat? Me? This is technically a max-rank robe.

Oddly enough, Clairvoyance hadn’t given me any sign that he had used any Skills, so he must’ve not used Analysis on me.

Can he not use it? Or is he really going off looks alone here?

“I believe we’ll have an especially easy time crushing you this year,” Cliff continued in the same haughty manner. “In fact, I’ll be impressed if you show your sorry faces at all. It’ll only further your humiliation.”

The kids behind him guffawed.

“...”

“What, too cowardly to reply? It’s the truth. Ah, but forgive me—we have *important business* to attend to. Unlike you two, my time is invaluable.”

With that, he spun about and strutted down the hall, his snickering students in tow. As we were leaving, however, one of his students—a guy with blonde hair just like Blud—shot me a dirty look.

What did I do to piss that kid off?

As soon as they were out of sight, Beatrice-san dipped her head apologetically. “I’m sorry about that. Um, thank you for helping me.”

“Nah, it’s no big deal, really. He had no right to do that. Who was he, anyway?”

“That was Cliff-sensei, the homeroom teacher for Class S, the highest-achieving class in the school. I’m so sorry he said those awful things about you.”

“Nah, I don’t really mind. More importantly, we’d really better get going. It’s just about time for homeroom.”

“Hm?” She blinked at me in surprise.

“What?”

“Is that it?” she asked warily. “Aren’t you upset after everything he’s said?”

“Wait, what did he say?”

“Doesn’t it infuriate you? I don’t care how much he berates me, but I can’t stand to hear him insult our students like that!”

“Um... Who cares?”

“Huh?”

“We know our kids are great. If he doesn’t know or care, that’s his loss. End of story.”

“But...!”

“Really, why does it matter? I couldn’t care less about Cliff-sensei or his class, and it’d just be a waste of time to dwell on what he said. All we have to do is keep on teaching Class F everything we can.”

Beatrice-san was so stunned that she seemed at a loss for words.

“To be clear,” I added, “I’m not saying that what others think doesn’t matter. Of course, it does. I’m just not grown up enough to take every little bit of criticism seriously. I mean, who has time for that?”

Origachan nodded. “It’s his fault.”

“Besides, if we’re really that upset by what he said, we just have to prove him wrong, right? Er, not that I know anything about how things work here... Sorry.”

Beatrice-san shook her head. “No... No, you’re right. All we can do is our best.”

“Yep! And don’t worry—I just know the class’s gonna be with us on this. If nothing else, they can put in the work.”

“Yes, you’re right!”

With that, we continued toward our class.

What neither of us realized, however, was that we were still being watched from right under our noses.

Chapter 3: The Best Use of Strength

After arriving at our classroom, I managed to finish homeroom with Beatrice-san's help, after which she got right into teaching the more theoretical stuff.

Come to think of it, Al's not here today, is she? She has her own classes, right? Man, I wanna see what she looks like as a teacher.



Beatrice-san's class was very intuitive and easy to follow, and she even managed to engage Agnos by wording the material in terms more relatable to him. The entire time, all the class's eyes were on her. If that wasn't enough, she seemed to come alive in front of a class. It was clear that she really loved being a teacher, on every level.

I'd much rather have a fun teacher like her than a stone-faced professor any day. Everyone can enjoy the class then, though I guess not everybody would agree on that.

After the morning classes were over, I had lunch with Saria and the others. My magic classes on the training grounds would come afterward.

Fortunately, the training grounds were empty when we arrived.

Nice, it's all ours again.

I made sure everyone was there, but just when I was about to open my mouth to begin, I stopped. Everyone seemed to have given up already, and even Beatrice-san looked nervous.

I knew this might be tricky, but I'll make it work somehow!

"Okay, to start us off... Agnos, recite the incantation for Fire."

"Shit, already?! You're not gonna lecture us or somethin' first?"

"Nope."

"Seriously?!"

"Let's put it this way—do you want me to stand here and talk at you the whole time?"

"No, sir, teacher-man!"

"Great, at least you're honest."

"Seriously, though, why're we gettin' right into it?"

"Eh, it feels right."

"You're goin' off feels here?!"

They wouldn't believe I had a Skill that could teach them magic in a heartbeat even if I told them—not that it came as a surprise, of course.

After a little more urging, Agnos finally stuck his hand out and obediently recited the incantation for Fire. He had a surprising affinity for Fire Magic but none for other elements.

“Fire!” He finished. “See, there's nothing—holy shit, fire?!”

Sure enough, an orb of flame was burning brightly in the palm of his hand. Aside from Lulune, Saria, and Berard—whose face I couldn't see under his teddy bear head—everyone's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

Right, this is Origa-chan's first time seeing my Instruction Skill. No wonder she's shocked.

“See?” I smiled at Agnos. “You can do it.”

“N-No way! I mean... Shit! I can use magic? Me?!”

“Yes way. That's all you.”

“C'mon, Aniki, what the hell kind of magic is this?”

“Uh, Fire Magic.”

“No, I mean, what kinda magic didja use so I can use magic?!”

Magic for using magic? Sounds kinda funny... Also, it's a Skill.

“Don't sweat the details,” I reassured him. “Why don't you take it a step further and use Fire Wall for us?”

“Huh?! C'mon, there ain't no way I can cast a mid-level spell like that by just sayin' 'Fire Wall' and—shit, I did it?!”

As soon as he said it, the flame on his hand spread across the ground, quickly rising into an impressive barricade.

“The hell is goin' on here?!” he screamed in terror. “What's up with me?!”

“Calm down,” Blud retorted, having regained his composure more quickly than the others. “Rest assured, no one else could have such idiotically shaped hair.”

“Wait, you’re right!” He put his hands to his hair, then froze a moment later. “You got a beef with my ‘do?! But that means this *is* me... Damn, I’m hot stuff!”

“Fool,” Blud scoffed. “Seiichi-sensei’s power is what made this possible.”

I shook my head. “Nope. I just gave you the jump-start you needed.”

That’s all I could do, after all—I drew out Agnos’s latent talent so that he could make use of it.

“Okay. Now that you all understand that I mean business, let’s get magic for the rest of you, too.”

That was all it took to shift the class’s disposition from initial doubt and shock to hope.

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Soon enough, everyone was able to use magic. Agnos could use the fire element, Blud showed affinity with water and ice elements, and Berard wielded Earth Magic. As for the girls, Helen could use fire and earth; Rachel, light; Irene, dark; and finally Flora had affinity with both wind and thunder elements.

“To think a day would come when I could cast,” Blud mused.

“Seiichi-sensei’s amazing,” Berard scrawled on his notepad.

“He’s strong *and* can teach magic this easily?” Helen shuddered faintly. “What a monster.”

“You’re super great, Seiichi-sensei~!” Rachel chirped.

Irene was already cackling to herself. “Hehe... hehehehe... Finally, I’ve overcome my sole shortcoming! What perfection! What beauty! I, Irene Prime, have become unbeatable!”

“I’ve got two whole elements!” Flora boasted. “*Two!* Is that amazing, or is that amazing?!”

Everyone was quickly getting used to their new powers. Nobody was flinging around the stupid levels of sheer force I could, but still, they went from being unable to cast anything to Ultimate-tier spells in the span of a few minutes. Just

like with Al, as long as it was of their elements, I could teach them any spell I knew in seconds.

I'd better be careful with this from now on, though. If word gets out that I can pump out Ultimate-tier mages quicker than I can make instant ramen, people will want to use it for war, no questions asked. Especially if the Kaizell Empire gets word, or the Kaizell Empire, or the Kaizell Empire... or yeah, the Kaizell Empire. I'd like to see them try to pick a fight with me, though.

As I smirked to myself at the thought, Beatrice-san shook her head in shock.

"I must be dreaming," she muttered.

"Hm?"

"Seiichi-san... do you have any idea what you just did?"

"Uh... Not really."

"They were utterly incapable of using magic less than an hour ago. I put so much time and effort into teaching them to no avail, but you made it look so easy."

Tears began to streak down her face.

Wait, tears?! Oh, god, this is my fault, isn't it?! Of course it is! I just dumped who-know-how-much of her work down the drain! Man, I wish past me would've considered that! Now present me is in deep trouble!

Beatrice-san wiped her tears away with a soft smile. "I-I'm sorry. I was just so happy that I didn't know what to do."

"Wait, you're happy?! You're not angry at me?"

"Why would I be? You've given each one of our kids a brighter future. Nobody could be upset about that." The smile she gave me was angelic.

H-How is she actually this nice?! And who the hell does that walking trash heap who insulted her in the hallway think he is?! I forgot his name already, but how could you let him lay a finger on her, past me?! You suck! Stop him next time, dumbass! Wait... I'm talking to me. Duh. I probably should've clocked him, though.

“That was amazing, Seiichi-oniichan,” Origa-chan whispered.

“It really was, right?” Saria beamed. “He’s really great!”

“I’d expect no less from my master!” Lulune declared proudly.

Even the girls were complimenting me now.

Damn, that feels nice.

I wound up blushing quite a bit, mainly because I still wasn’t used to taking compliments, but I took care to regain my composure before turning to face the last student.

“Leon,” I started.

“Y-Yes?!” He jumped, clearly startled by my sudden attention. He curled up in a fetal position, desperately trying to cover his face. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!!”

I hurried closer to him, and noticing something was wrong, Beatrice-san followed.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked. “You don’t have to act so scared.”

He’s not scared of me, is he? I didn’t even do anything. That really hurts my feelings. I have stacked Stats, sure, but my heart’s about as tough as a soap bubble. Can’t you evolve a little more in that direction, body?

Talking to him only seemed to make things worse, though.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll never use magic again, I swear! I won’t, so please stop hitting me! Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it! Stop hurting—”

With that, he passed out.

“Leon-kun?!” Beatrice-san exclaimed.

“Leon, wake up!” I panicked. “What’s wrong?! Are you scared of me?! Did I really look that angry?! I didn’t think you could even see my face!”

“Seiichi-san, calm down!” Beatrice-san snapped. “I need to take him to the nurse’s office right away, so please attend to the other students.”

“R-Right... I can do that.”

I should probably be the one to take him since I was a guy, but I knew that even if he woke up, I'd be worse than useless. Beatrice-san was a lot better suited to stressful situations like this.

At first, I was afraid that Leon would be too heavy to carry despite his small size, but Beatrice-san had no problem scooping him up in a princess carry and running into the school building.

I've gotta admit, she looks a little weird carrying someone like that, but it's like Leon was born to get carried around.

Saria and the others finally caught up to me.

“What’s wrong, Seiichi? Is Leon-kun okay?”

I nodded at Saria. “Yeah, I think so. He’s in good hands with Beatrice-san, at least.”

“Aniki!” Agnos shouted worriedly. “What happened to Leon?”

It wasn’t long before everyone was gathered around us.

“Sorry, I really don’t know,” I replied honestly.

Blud crossed his arms thoughtfully. “He must’ve experienced some trauma in the past.”

“Trauma?”

He nodded. “If what I heard is correct, he promised he would ‘never use magic again.’ In other words, he was once able to cast without issue. More important, however, is what he said next; ‘please stop hitting me.’ I’ve no idea what could’ve happened to him exactly, but he must have had an unpleasant experience with casting in the past.”

I didn’t know what to say. Even at a time like this, Blud’s perception and deductive talents were amazing.

Is he super amazing, or am I just really, really dumb? I get the feeling it's the latter.

“So, Seiichi-sensei?” he prompted me. “What do we do now?”

“Uh, yeah, great question. I guess until Beatrice-san gets back, you should all practice using whatever magic—”

At that moment, however, I was cut off by a voice behind me.

“Well, look who it is! If it isn’t the worthless fools of Class F!”

It was the same guy who had stopped Beatrice-san and me in the hall earlier that day, with his entire class in tow.

“It’s you!” I shouted. “You, uh... um. Yeah, you. What do you want?”

“Did you forget my name?!”

“Sorry, I just couldn’t care less, so...”

“You *couldn’t care less*?!”

Whoops, I didn’t mean to say that out loud. I guess that was pretty rude. And Origa-chan, stop laughing at him!

The name thing aside, I still couldn’t understand what he had against me.

Seriously, though, what’s his name? Don’t I have Perfect Recollection or whatever? I guess that means his name isn’t important. Besides, he didn’t introduce himself to me... I think.

“Hahaha!” He laughed. “So, the teacher of a worthless class is worthless himself? How fitting! Very well, allow me to elucidate you—I am the lauded Cliff Boldt, duke of the Kaizell Empire!”

“You’re the loud Cliff Boldt? I can see—er, hear that.”

“Pfft!” Origa-chan stifled another laugh.

The Fruits of Evolution had given me some pretty good hearing—but more than that, I enjoyed watching him try to intimidate me when I was a good chunk taller than him. I had a model’s height now, after all.

And yeah, I know that’s not what he said. Why do I feel so tempted to bug him, though? And Origa-chan, you’re free to hang on my sleeve like that, but you’re not fooling anyone. We can all hear you laughing.

“You simpering simpleton!” His nostrils flared. “How dare you insult me?!”

“Hey, fuckface!” Agnos blurted out from beside me, evidently unable to sit back and watch any longer. “That’s a real shit move you got there, wanderin’ up an’ callin’ people worthless!”

One of Cliff’s students came forward, backed by a small posse of goons. For some reason, he looked distinctly similar to Blud.

“What harm is there in saying it as it is?” he scoffed. “Not that you would know, of course—you’re too braindead to even realize your own incompetence.”

“The hell’d you say to me?!”

“My, how barbaric! I almost feel sorry for your poor teachers, having to tame a miserable maggot like you.”

“That’s it, asshat!” Agnos snarled. “I ain’t gonna just listen to you insult Aniki an’ Beatrice-neesan!”

I planted my hand on his shoulder. “That’s enough, Agnos.”

He whipped around at me. “The hell’re you stoppin’ me for?!”

“I mean, it’s a waste of time.”

“Huh?”

“We’ve only got so much time, y’know? There are billion better ways to spend it rather than on these guys.”

“Seiichi-oniichan.” Origa-chan snickered. “You can at least try to be... Hahaha!”

Yeah, but I’m sick of trying to be nice to guys who are clearly trying to get under my skin. I don’t have the patience for that.

Learning to deal with people was an important part of life, but personally, I couldn’t imagine a single reason why I should get along with this guy. It couldn’t hurt to piss him off a little.

Cliff-sensei’s mouth flapped open and shut for a moment as his face turned bright-red with rage. “How *dare* you?! You’d best prepare your sorry pupils!”

“For what?”

“The Clash of Classes, of course! Your band of incompetents will rue the day you made enemies of Class S!”

“...”

I already regret talking to him.

As I fished for a way to end the conversation, though, a smile crept onto his face.

“Listen well! The Heroes may be forbidden from joining the Clash of Classes on their own, but Class S has received special permission to recruit their assistance in training! We’ll be stronger than ever!”

“What?”

“Come forth, Heroes!”

With that, a whole group of students who once wore my same uniform emerged, headed by none other than Kannazuki-senpai herself. I could even spot Shouta and my other friends in the crowd. I was speechless.

“Hahaha!” Cliff-sensei cackled. “You have my noble Kaizellian heritage to thank for such a feat! It’s too late to plead for mercy now—I’ll enjoy utterly humiliating you on center stage! After me!”

With that, he led his massive throng of students to a far corner of the training grounds. For some reason, the kid who looked like Blud shot me another cold look as he passed, just like he had in the hallway. Not only that, he also glared at Saria and the other girls.

Seriously, what’s his problem?

Kannazuki-senpai snuck me a worried glance, but all I could do was hope she’d get that I’d be okay. Somehow, she seemed reassured after that.

Wait, did she get my message somehow?!

Similarly, Shouta gave us a pitying look, but Kenji looked furious. Even though he couldn’t have run into Class F that often, he was probably pissed with Cliff-sensei’s holier-than-thou bullshit. I also noticed that Aoyama and a few of my other old bullies were giving Saria filthy looks. That got a rise out of me, for sure.

At least I can still get a little—no, pretty damn—ticked off, just like anyone else. I guess my sense of jealousy is still intact. That’s a relief.

More importantly, it seemed I’d be running into the Heroes again much earlier than I was hoping. Hopefully I’d be able to get some kind of message out to Shouta and the others.

Agnos gritted his teeth beside me. “Aniki, is it okay to get pissed after gettin’ crapped on like that?”

“Of course—and don’t worry, now that you have magic, you’ll be able to show them up soon enough.”

“That ain’t it, man—I’m talkin’ about how he laughed at you and Beatrice-neesan!”

“Huh?” I wasn’t expecting that.

“I overheard you two chattin’ about that creep earlier this mornin’. I’m tryin’ to keep a lid on it, but I can’t stop thinkin’ about how sad Beatrice-neesan sounded!” He turned to address the rest of the class. “Aren’t you all pissed?! Beatrice-neesan’s the one person who stuck with us and helped us, and they shat all over her pride! You better believe I’m pissed!”

Blud rolled his eyes with a snort. “We’ll get back at them, then.”

“Huh?”

“Now that we have the power to put them in their place, all we need to do is track them down and pound them during the Clash of Classes. We’ll outrank them in the midterms as well for good measure. Or would you prefer to mope about it?”

“N-Nah.”

“Right... I forgot some of us may struggle to grade that well.”

Agnos’s nostrils flared. “Hey! You callin’ me stupid?!”

“Yes, and?”

“At least pretend to deny it, asshat!”

Flora chuckled. “I like it! Why don’t we show them all who’s boss? I’m still terrified of those midterms, though!”

Helen shook her head with a sigh. “You don’t have to admit your fear so proudly... but you do have a point. We can’t let this insult to Beatrice-sensei stand.”

“They were really rude, huh~?” Rachel echoed.

Irene nodded imperiously. “Rest assured, I’ll be nothing short of the perfect support for all of you! Ah, could I be any more benevolent?”

Agnos seemed deeply moved by their words. “You guys...”

Berard put a hand on the fiery-tempered boy’s shoulder and held out his sketchbook. *You don’t even have to ask. We love Beatrice-sensei just as much as you do.*

“Yeah... Yeah, you’re right!” His eyes lit up with enthusiasm. “All right, let’s show those ass-clumps who’s boss! They’ll regret pickin’ on our teachers!”

“Yeah!” roared the rest of the class in unison.

Beatrice-san sure is loved, huh?

I had no idea how strong the Heroes were, but Class F had a bonafide monstrosity teaching them. I smirked at the thought of the bloodbath that was to come.

Wait, am I getting sadistic in my old age? I still count as mostly normal on that front, right? I’m nothing like those wackos at the Guild!

One thing was clear, though. It was my first time really using my powers outside of battle, but— “This is how I *should* be using my cheat powers,” I muttered half to myself.

Chapter 4: Friendship

We wound up heading right back to class after that. The class had decided that they wanted to wait until the day of the Clash of Classes to really strike fear into Class S's hearts with their new magic.

I was just as eager to show those snobs up, but by the time we'd gotten back to the room, I'd pretty much forgotten about them. I wasn't going to just let them off the hook after what they said about Beatrice-san, but it was up to Agnos and the others to deal with it. They had had to deal with that nonsense for way longer than me. I just hoped that teaching Class F would help them get the recognition they deserved, and to that end, I would support them however I could.

Nonetheless, I really had been caught off guard by running into all the Heroes there. The only upside was that nobody noticed who I was, except, of course, Kannazuki-senpai. Of course, they didn't. I'd slimmed down a lot and was wearing my robe. I was still surprised Kannazuki-senpai recognized me as easily as she did.

Before long, Beatrice-san returned to the classroom. I had stopped by the infirmary to let her know we were back in the room, but Leon still hadn't come to while I was there.

"I'm back," she announced somewhat sullenly.

"Oh, Beatrice-san."

"Beatrice-neesan! Is Leon okay?!"

She replied with a small shake of her head, "He's awake now, but he said he'd like to be alone."



“Oh...”

Well, at least he’s awake now. Seriously, what happened to him? Isn’t there anything I can do to help?

I let out a small sigh. “Well, if he wants to be alone, I guess that’s all we can do for him. Now, for the rest of today’s class—did you get what I asked you to, Beatrice-san?”

“Of course. It’s not uncommon for students to leave the school grounds for leveling, after all.”

“Really? Great!”

When I had visited her in the nurse’s office, I had asked her if there was anywhere we could train as a class outside of the training grounds. We started talking about the possibility of letting the kids fight monsters, and it seemed she was able to get permission for an impromptu field trip.

I moved for the door. “Let’s head on out, then.”

“Hold up, Aniki!” Agnos stopped me. “Can we stop by and check on Leon first?”

“That’s...” I cast Beatrice-san a sidelong look. “That’d be okay, right?”

He claimed that he wanted to be alone for a while, but I didn’t know exactly how he was doing after waking up.

Beatrice-san thought for a moment. “I believe a short visit would be fine—in fact, it may be just what he needs.”

“Well, you heard her. We’ll swing by the infirmary on the way out, then.”

“Yeah!”

With that, we left the classroom.

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I, Leon Hardie, am afraid.

I have an important secret I was keeping from my classmates. I can—or rather, I could use magic.

Normally, Class F was where nobodies who couldn't use magic wound up. Wielding magic made it so that even if you couldn't use a sword or spear, you could still beat most people without a problem. Magic wasn't everything, of course, and a few people were good at both magic and physical combat, but they were rare. That meant that mages were lauded and treasured across the continent, and their usefulness in large-scale conflicts probably had a lot to do with it.

I was born into House Hardie as the second son, and ever since I was little, I was able to use five entire elements. My parents were overjoyed when they learned that, and their happiness made me feel fulfilled. I studied magic day in and day out. What I didn't realize was how dangerous that was for me.

My brother—my older twin—had command of two elements. That was impressive, but he was always compared to me in an unflattering way. As the future head of House Hardie, he earnestly studied how to rule our land. That was, of course, until some of our family started to believe that I should be the next family head instead.

That was the beginning of my descent into hell.

They put a special item on me that sealed away my magic and put me through grueling “combat training.” I wasn't any good with swords or spears, so I got beaten up over and over again. Sometimes they would tie me up and run all kinds of experiments on me. I had my bones broken; I had my organs pulverized; I ended most days covered in blood. Whenever I was close to dying, my brother's servants or noble friends would heal me, and it'd start all over again. No matter how desperately I begged for forgiveness, my brother refused to listen. My cries were like music to his ears as he tortured me endlessly.

Nobody in my family—not even those who had suggested me as the next family head—did anything to stop him. Brother had far too much influence by then, and besides, they only thought of appointing me because I was decently talented and very weak-willed. They assumed I would be easy to manipulate. To them, I was worthless without my magic talent. I was worse than a doll.

I had been subjected to that hell because I could use magic. I stopped holding out any hope for my own abilities, and I began to hate my stupid body. Then finally, it happened—I was unable to cast magic at all.

Magic was, at its root, the power of imagination. Incantations and magic items just made the transition from imaginary to real easier. I'd never needed incantations to cast spells, though—all I needed was the name of the spell. Everyone feared me for it. But after all that torture, I knew that envisioning magic would only put me through more pain and suffering. I stopped being able to think about magic entirely.

I became terrified of magic, and as long as I had that fear carved into my soul, I'd never be able to cast again.

"It's all because of me that Nii-san is like that... If I had never been born, I never would've gotten hurt like that."

Just as I wished I could disappear, the infirmary door flung open.

"Hey! You okay, Leon?!" Agnos shouted.

Blud shook his head. "You're such a fool, Agnos. This is an infirmary. Be quiet, won't you?"

Berard held up his sketchbook. *Feeling better?*

"Are you okay~?" Rachel asked worriedly.

"At least you're awake now," Helen added aloofly.

Flora grinned. "Man, we were all super scared when you collapsed."

Irene nodded. "You seem fine... I'm sure you'll recover soon."

Everyone in Class F was there.

"Why are you...?" I started uneasily.

Agnos gave me a strange look. "Whaddya mean, why? We're worried 'bout you."

They came to see me? Really?

"I'm so sorry you had to waste your time coming here..."

“‘Waste’? Shit, you’re dumb. There’s nobody we’d rather see!”

I didn’t know how to reply to that.

Agnos-kun sighed. “Look, I ain’t gonna ask what happened to you. More importantly, we’re gonna go out with Seiichi-sensei and get some training in. You comin’?”

“Out? A-As in, outside the school?”

I didn’t get why they weren’t going to use the training grounds anymore, but Blud-kun fortunately noticed my confusion.

“You saw, didn’t you? We can all use magic now. Not long after you left, however, Class S barged in and began insulting us. As such, we’ve decided to retaliate. We wish to keep our newfound strength a secret for the time being, and Seiichi-sensei agreed to take us somewhere more isolated to train.”

Agnos had to get a word in. “But get this—those stuck-up pricks even went and insulted Beatrice-neesan! That’s why we’re gonna *really* show ‘em who’s boss in the Clash of Classes.”

They were pretty busy while I was unconscious...

Blud nodded. “As I’m sure you’re aware, each class has two teams of five for the event, one for boys and one for girls. They compete one by one, and whichever team reaches three wins first is declared the winner. With Saria and Lulune joining the class, the girls have a full team, but our boys’ team is one member short. That doesn’t bar us from entry, but it would pose a significant risk, and our opponents aren’t Class S for nothing.”

“That’s why we want you to fight with us. C’mon, you’ll do great!”

Agnos-kun, Blud-kun, and even Berard-kun all bowed their heads to me.

“N-No, um, you don’t have to ask like that!”

“We really wanna show those asshats who’s boss. We gotta pound ‘em until they admit our teach’s the best in the school. We can’t do it without ya!”

“I...”

I could see how much it meant to him.

“B-But... I can’t!” I stammered. “I can’t fight!”

It hurt to turn them down so bluntly, but instead of being hurt by my words, Agnos-kun *smiled*.

“That so? Too bad. Well, us three have just gotta win, then! We got this, no sweat!”

“B-But why do you...?”

How can you smile like that after I’ve turned you down?

“Jeez, quit with the sappy stuff!” Agnos-kun snapped, pinching my cheeks in each hand.

“Mgh?!”

He looked me dead in the eyes. “Make eye contact and *smile*, dammit! Got it?! Don’t you dare take your eyes off us!”

“Huh...?”

“And don’t you dare show me that mopey I-wish-I-were-dead look ever again, got it?! Eyes. On. Us! Forget about everyone else. If you’ve got time to worry about what could go wrong, then you ain’t payin’ attention to how damn cool I am!”

I didn’t know how to reply to that.

Blud-kun sighed. “Yes, I’m sure if you watch him, you’ll get a good laugh or two. He’s impressively dim-witted.”

“Who’re you callin’ dim?! ”

Berard-kun held out his notepad to me. *All you need to do is sit back, relax, and watch us win.*

For the first time, someone actually cared about me. Even my parents were only interested in my magical talents—they didn’t so much as look at me after I lost my casting ability. None of my relatives cared about me beyond my usefulness in their schemes, and they readily sided with my brother against me. I never mattered to any of them.

Agnos-kun and the others were different. They accepted me for who I was. Even though I couldn't cast a spell to save my life, they saw me for me and were even willing to fight for me. I couldn't hold back my tears a second longer.

"Isn't that nice~?"

"It's weird to see a guy sob like that..."

"Man, I wish I had such nice friends!"

"I'd imagine this is a so-called 'manly friendship.' I doubt that we could emulate such a feat—not that their camaraderie is half as gorgeous as I am, of course."

Hearing the girls chatting behind me, I couldn't help but smile once more.

Chapter 5: Getting Over It?

After we stopped to check on Leon, we left the school just as planned. There were still plenty of kids outside, so the monster situation was mostly under control, though there were still occasional attacks. Between Beatrice-san and I, though, I doubted our students would be in any danger.

“All right, let’s get this started!” I announced. “But, uh... What exactly are we supposed to do now?”

“Aniki!” Agnos raised his hand in the air. “How about you fight us some more?”

“Me, fight you?”

“Yeah! Sure, we can cast magic just fine now, but I dunno if we can use it good enough in a fight. So, I was thinkin’, why not give us a chance to get the feel for magic better?”

Blud nodded. “We hope to build up the necessary muscle memory through combat.”

I don’t get why Blud had to repeat him like that, but I get what they want.

“I’ll gladly practice with you, then,” I replied. “Before we get started, however, what are the exact rules of this whole Clash of Classes thing?”

“Each class puts forward two teams of five, one for boys and one for girls,” Beatrice-san explained. “The matches take the form of five one-on-one duels, and the first team to three victories advances to the next round.”

“Wait, five? Doesn’t that mean we’re short a boy?”

“Rest assured, the minimum team size is three. Of course, if such a team suffers even a single loss, they immediately lose the Clash.”

Agnos nodded. “And since Leon can’t fight, we just gotta win every bout!”

I wasn't there for their talk with Leon, but apparently, he was officially out of the Clash.

I nodded thoughtfully. "All right, then, I guess that means I should fight you all one by one. For the girls... wait, there ARE six of you. That probably means either Saria or Lulune's gonna have to sit out."

Saria scrunched up her brow in deep thought. "Who should it be, Lulune-chan?"

"If you don't mind, Saria-sama, I would like to take the fifth slot," Lulune replied.

"Huh?"

"By joining this so-called 'clash,' I'll be able punish the fools who insulted Master with my own legs. As his knight, it's only proper that I fight to reclaim his honor."

Even Origa-chan gaped at her. "Lulune..."

Who are you? That doesn't sound like the gluttonous donkey I know. Is there more to her than just eating?

"And on the dawn of my victory, I shall claim my prize of dinner with Master!"

I sighed. "I should've known."

I was relieved she still seemed to be herself—honestly, I should've known food would come into it somehow.

Lulune turned back to Saria. "Will you permit me to fight, then?"

She beamed back. "Of course! Just don't lose out there!"

"Rest assured, I'll stake everything I have on filling my stomach—er, restoring Master's honor."

"Why is my honor just a sidenote now?!" I snapped.

Honestly, I should've known!

※ ※ ※

From that afternoon until the day of the Clash, we continued our practice matches outside of the Academy. Unsurprisingly, they each seemed somewhat weaker than they had when I first fought them, no doubt because they were still unused to casting in combat. More physical spells, like covering their weapons with flames or firing blasts off at point-blank, were where they had comparatively more success. They all had decent proficiency with buffing magic as well, so with that, they were able to move a lot more quickly and hit harder than before. I thought that might be enough, but apparently, I was mistaken—according to Beatrice, the disparity between their abilities was still large enough that they would lose at their current level.

Oddly enough, something about them seemed slightly off as they practiced. I could tell that they were as eager as ever to show up their Class S bullies, but they seemed somehow depressed. Whenever I asked what was wrong, however, they just brushed me off, insisting they were fine. At first, I wondered if they just weren't very confident about magic, but that didn't seem to be the case.

In the end, I didn't figure out the source of their gloom until the day of the Clash itself.

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Several days had passed since I began training Agnos and the others outside the school. I was heading toward the classroom like every morning when I noticed a group of boys in the hall up ahead. Saria was there as well, with Lulune standing as if to shield her from them.

I was puzzled as to what they were doing there—but then, I got close enough to recognize the boys.

“What...?”

I froze. One was Aoyama, the classmate who had refused to let me join the class group when we had been transported to this world. Beside him was Ooki, who had gone out of his way to tell the class about my bad grades. The rest of the group were all boys who routinely beat me up back on Earth. They were the Heroes.

As soon as I realized it was them, I found myself unable to move. I knew they couldn't hurt me as I was now, but the longer I stood there, the more my fear grew.

"C'mon, don't be like that," one of the boys chided Saria. "Don't you know we're heroes?"

"Yeah, don't you recognize us? You're in Class 2-F, right? You should really be hedgin' your bets with men with promising futures—like us."

"Let's have a little fun, huh?" One of them—I recognized him as Kobayashi from Kenji's boxing club—grinned and reached out to them, his eyes full of lust.

Lulune wrapped her arms around Saria and pulled her back, well out of his reach. "Stay back, filth. Your very breathing pollutes the air—no, your very lives are as insipid poison to the world. Kindly un-birth yourselves."

"Jeez, that's rude! You might just hurt our feeli—"

"Why should I care how filth feels?"

Saria, however, still didn't seem to grasp what was going on, and her gaze darted uneasily between Lulune and the boys.

He laughed. "Damn, you're such a prude! I'd love to teach you a lesson. Just the thought of bending you over and showing you how heroic I can really be is givin' me shivers!"

They grinned lewdly as they ogled the girls. Instead of recoiling in disgust, however, Lulune seemed just as confused as Saria now.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to mate with us."

"Mate'? Haha, I like that! Getting right to the point! So how about you stop being so shy so that we can begin?"

The guys fanned out, cornering the girls so that they had no easy way out.

Lulune gave them a measured look before turning to Saria. "It seems these men are seeking to engage with us as mating partners."

"Huh? They are?"

“Yes. It must be some sort of instinctual defense mechanism—such inferior males wouldn’t approach us otherwise. They must know they’ll struggle to produce offspring otherwise.”

“Yeah... I bet.”

And Saria just agrees?!

“But can they even have a kid?” she continued with a dubious look. “They sure don’t look healthy enough for it.”

Lulune nodded sadly. “Not to mention they’d surely struggle to satisfy anyone. I almost feel sorry for them, but as they say, ignorance is bliss.”

Wow, the blows keep coming! They’re just tearing through those guys.

Aoyama and the others were livid.

“You fucking bitches sure have a way with words, huh?! What makes you think any of that shit’s true?”

“Woman’s intuition,” both Saria and Lulune replied in unison.

Damn, the exact same reply! No wonder Aoyama and the others look so shocked—they’ve got no idea who or what those girls really are!

“We can easily tell if a male’s any good,” Saria said with pride. “Right, Lulune-chan? That’s how we know Seiichi’s the best! Relationship aside, I’d love him forever!”

Lulune nodded sagely. “I suppose I’ve never looked at him in that way before. I’m... not sure if ‘like’ is the correct word, but I’m sure I feel that way about him regardless of my female instincts or his male traits. I’ve never felt anything quite like it—it’s as though I’m floating whenever I’m near him. He’s dear to me, that much is certain.”

“Right?”

“Regardless, I have an excellent sense of what makes a prime male—I wouldn’t be able to make it in the wild otherwise. It’s clear that Master is prime mating material.” With that, she turned to face Aoyama and his gang. “So? How long are you planning on disgracing this world with your miserable lives? Why don’t you go back in time and prevent yourselves from being born, hm?”

God, they really laid it on thick since they still don't know I'm listening. I don't even know if I'm more happy or embarrassed!

What they said made some sense, though. Saria, in particular, grew up in a place where death was around every corner. No wonder she'd have a natural urge to leave something behind.

But she said she'd love me either way... not that I'd call myself prime mating material or anything.

More importantly, I'd never seen anyone get so utterly destroyed before. Aoyama was trying hard to smile, but his voice came out as a shrill scream.

"Shut up! I'll prove to you just how good a man I am!"

He lunged forward, reaching for her—and my fear was suddenly gone.

What the hell does he think he's doing?

My legs could suddenly move again, as if the trauma that was binding them had magically disappeared.

Lulune dropped low in preparation for a kick, probably thinking she wouldn't be able to dodge his grab in time. She didn't have to lay a finger on him, though—before he could reach them, I jumped between them, snatched up the girls, and carried them to safety. My hood slipped off in the process, but that wasn't important now. Maybe it would cause problems for me later, but keeping Saria and Lulune safe came first.

"Seiichi?!" Saria exclaimed.

"M-Master?!" Lulune cried.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologized.

If I'd stepped in sooner, they wouldn't have been in any trouble in the first place—not that either of them seemed the slightest bit threatened. Still, it was my fault for freezing up for so long.

Enough waffling around. My stupid trauma can burn in hell.

It took Aoyama and the others a moment to figure out what had happened, but when they finally found me, they seemed as surprised as they were angry.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“I’m Class F’s homeroom teacher.”

“Yeah, I fuckin’ knew that! You were at the training grounds! How does that give you the right to mess with the Heroes?!”

“What does your being the Heroes have to do with anything?” I asked honestly.

Aoyama and the others froze in confusion for a moment, but they began grinning again easily enough.

“Lemme put it this way—drop the girls and we won’t rough you up.”

“Yeah!” Kobayashi sneered. “You think you’re so cool, but you don’t wanna make us angry. Just fork over the girls and we’ll let you go.”

I smiled pleasantly. “No.”

“What?! You don’t get it. We’re seriously gonna rough you up!”

I frowned exaggeratedly. “I don’t want to get hurt...” I hugged Saria and Lulune closer to me and looked Aoyama square in the eyes. “But they’re *my* women.”

Whoa, I didn’t know I could say stuff like that!

“Seiichi...”

“Oh, Master...”

Wh-Why’re you both blushing like that?! Sorry I embarrassed you two like that, but trust me, it’s just as bad for me! What’s my dumb ass even saying?! This is my confession to Al all over again! Did I slip into a shoujo manga or something?! This better not be thanks to that stupid Master of Men title or anything! Seriously, why won’t my body just listen to me?!



The thought occurred to me that my body might've judged this to be the best thing for the situation, but I desperately hoped that wasn't true.

I'll have to be a lot more careful from now on. This better not become a habit or anything! Like hell I'm gonna keep saying shit like that!

Oddly enough, Kobayashi seemed just as red in the face as he lunged forward to slug me.

"This is what you get for fucking with the Heroes!" he shouted.

He'd hit me with countless jabs just like that back on Earth, and I lost my lunch on many occasions, but now, he may as well have been moving in slow motion. Especially after being on the receiving end of Saria's Flash Arm, his punch didn't seem the slightest bit threatening.

Still, it was Aoyama and his thugs. I didn't know what I might let slip if I stuck around, and that wasn't a risk I was willing to take. Deciding to focus on getting to class on time instead, I hugged Saria and Lulune tighter to me and tried to jump right over the group.

Unfortunately, I must've been more shaken by my one-liner than I thought, and I totally screwed up my jump. Instead of soaring neatly over them, my foot collided with Kobayashi's face.

"Gwngh?!"

"Oops! Sorry!"

It really was an accident, but I was nonetheless surprised to hear I sounded genuinely sorry. Before they could surround us again, though, I decided to use Flash to just zip away and back to class.

When we arrived, though, both Saria and Lulune were still blushing fiercely and staring off into space.

"Uh... Hello? We're at the classroom now?"

"They're my women,'" they both muttered dreamily.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

Just when I thought they'd finally helped me get over an old trauma, I was scarred in a whole new way. It seemed I'd have this new ordeal to chew on for a good while yet.

Chapter 6: Clash of Classes *The Beginning*

After the encounter with Aoyama, I continued training my students. Even though Leon wasn't competing, he would often come watch us practice.

Finally, the day of the Clash of Classes was upon us. It was being held on the training grounds, and the bleachers were packed with students who weren't participating as well as all their parents. Personally, I was hoping to lay eyes on the king of the Kaizell Empire, especially since his son Blud was competing, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Oh, well. I guess he is a king or whatever, and from what I've heard, he's not exactly the most invested dad. I might just be giving him a hard time for all the other awful shit his country does, though.

All the competing students were gathered in the middle of the grounds, and I saw Barney-san for the first time in what felt like forever take to the podium.

"Greetings, everyone. We seem to be truly blessed with wonderful weather for our Clash of Classes. I wish every student the best of luck."

Cheers exploded from the stands. They'd clearly been looking forward to this for a long time now.

"That's enough formalities," he continued, clearing his throat. "I'm sure you all want to know who will be facing off against who, and without further ado—here we are!"

He waved his hand, and a massive mana projection formed above the field, just like I'd seen in Terbelle with the Capital Derby. I eagerly looked to see who Class F would be facing first.

"Haha... I don't know if this is good luck or if we're totally screwed."

In the first round, we would be facing none other than Class S themselves.

As I grimaced to myself, their homeroom teacher strode over to me with a smug grin.

“Well! Who would’ve thought we’d meet in the first round?”

“Yeah, what a coincidence.”

“Oh? Do my eyes deceive me, or do you not even have enough students for a full team?”

“We’re a small class, after all.”

“Ahahahaha! Oh, you poor wretches! Will you even be able to sate the crowd, I wonder? But here’s an idea—make sure to leave your roster open in case you have any last-minute additions. That way, you’ll know your loss will be based on your natural inferiority alone. You have a boy who’s sitting out, don’t you? You can tell him he’s free to drop in if he feels like getting beaten to a bloody pulp—not that such a spineless fool would dare do such a thing!”

I cast a sidelong glance at Leon.

Yeah, I don’t think that’s in the cards.

“By all means, continue to wallow in your ineptitude,” he continued. “Make sure you watch every second of your precious students being reduced to punching bags. Hahaha... MWAHAHAHAHA!”

Thanks for the comically villainous laugh, asshat.

As I sighed, Beatrice-san shot me a worried look.

“Do you think they’ll be all right? I’d hate it if anything bad happened to them.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. This is what they chose out of their own free will. All we can do now is cheer them on.”

“Yeah!” Agnos echoed. “Stop worrying, kick back, and enjoy the show!”

“Rest assured, we will show them no mercy whatsoever,” Lulune asserted.

“Uh, Lulune? Maybe you should tone it back a little.”

She’s not going to seriously hurt anyone, is she? From that look in her eyes, she’s literally out for blood.

“Well, it won’t be Class F’s turn for a while anyway,” I said. “We’d better get out of the way for the competing classes.”

The Clash of Classes was being held one class at a time, and each match utilized the whole field. We quickly moved off the grounds and into the section of the bleachers set aside for participants and teachers.

We'd barely sat down when a voice began blasting out over the arena.

"It's finally here, the Clash of Classes! I'll be your announcer, Lily from the AV Club! Joining me here in the broadcast room is Michael-san, our commentator!"

"Hello, I'm Michael."

Wait, the commentator is who? I've never heard of him before! And why does he have such a relaxed voice?!

Beside me, Beatrice-san furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Michael?" she muttered. "Michael who?"

Nobody knows him?! I thought for sure he was famous or something from the way he was introduced! Why'd they call him in in the first place? I mean, even Barney-san looks confused!

"Here's our first class for today!" the announcer declared, and the mana projector changed to display Class A and Class C. "What kind of matches do you think we're going to see, Michael-san?"

"Well, it's, um... probably going to be very exciting."

"Really? That's a fascinating analysis!"

In what universe is that a commentary?! They've gotta be kidding!

"Personally, I think that the contestant to watch out for is Gionis-senshu from Class A," the announcer continued.

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Not only is he the little brother of Roberto-senshu, said to be the shining star of Class S's lineup, he's also the Second Prince of the Kingdom of Windberg. In terms of raw magic prowess, he's a step behind his brother—but taken as a whole, he's Class S material, no doubt about it!"

"Really?" Michael replied. "I didn't know that."

It's literally your job to know stuff like that!

If this Gionis guy was a prince of Windberg, that meant he was one of Landze-san's sons. That would also imply that we'd be butting heads with his older brother soon enough, since he was competing with Class S.

I wonder what he's like...

"All right, it seems the contestants are ready!" Lily-san announced. "Let's get right into it. First up, Class C's Bob-senshu versus Class A's Terry-senshu—BEGIN!"

And with that, the Clash of Classes was officially underway.

Chapter 7: Clash of Classes *Berard*

The match between Class A and Class C went smoothly. First the boys competed, after which it was the girls' turn.

Just as the announcer said, though, Landze-san's son, Gionis-senshu, really was something else. He was downright overpowering, to the point that he won his fight in literal seconds. Most of the other students were comparable overall, but he overshadowed them all easily. Before his opponent could even lift his sword, Gionis-senshu was on top of him and got a clean knockout with a single spell.

Is everyone in Class S that strong?

After that, the girls' matches began. Perhaps because of the sheer stat gap, Class A would be the ones advancing to the next round.

"Those were some brilliant fights!" Lily-san crowed. "Gionis-senshu was just as overpowering as I thought! How about some commentary on that fight, Michael-san?"

"I honestly have no idea what's going on."

"So, you're saying the matches were *that* technically intense? That's really saying something!"

Somebody get that guy out of the announcer's booth! It's his job to at least try, right? If he's not breaking it down so that the average spectator can follow, what's the point of him even being there? Get it together, Michael-san!

More importantly, the end of the battle between Classes A and C meant that it was our turn next. After watching Class A leave the field, I shot my students an uneasy look.

"You sure you can take on Class S?"

Agnos grinned. "No problem, Teach!"

“We just have to be ourselves,” Blud added with a nod.

Please relax, Sensei, read Berard’s notebook.

“We can’t lose,” Helen asserted.

Rachel clenched her fists with a determined look. “I’ll do my best~”

“Soon, the whole world will know of my beauty!” Irene boasted.

Flora punched the air. “Yeah! We’ve got this!”

“Master, I’m hungry,” Lulune said bluntly.

“Just hold out, dammit!” Nobody seemed worried, least of all Lulune. “So, I guess you’d better get going.”

“Yeah!” echoed the whole class.

With that, they took their first steps onto the training grounds. As they entered the field, they weren’t met with any applause. Instead, the folks in the bleachers began heckling them.

“What the hell is Class F getting so fired up about?”

“No way a bunch of magicless wimps can win.”

“Aren’t they just embarrassing themselves?”

“I bet they won’t clutch out even a single round.”

Beatrice-san, Saria, Leon, and I were still waiting in the bleachers, so we weren’t on the receiving end of the derision, but it still felt awful. Beatrice-san seemed downright depressed, and Leon was shuddering in fear. Only Saria was unfazed as she shouted out encouragement at her classmates.

Despite the verbal abuse, not a single member of Class F seemed dispirited. If anything, they seemed to be discussing something.

“‘Magicless wimps’, huh?” Agnos smirked.

“They’re right,” Blud reasoned. “Well... they *were* right.”

Helen shot them a hard look. “Are we really doing this? Why shouldn’t we show our hands now?”

Blud snorted. “I tried to reason with him.”

Agnos grinned. “Course we are! We gotta show them what we’re made of and that we ain’t gonna lose!”

Helen shrugged. “Well, I’m not gonna lose to those pricks either way.”

Irene flipped her hair vainly. “I agree. Besides, isn’t it more beautiful this way?”

“Oh, enough hard talk!” Flora enthused. “We’ll just fight like we practiced, and we’ll win in no time!”

Berard held up his notebook. *After Sensei’s teachings, I’m not sure if we could fight as we used to even if we tried.*

“Y-Yeah, probably~” Rachel chimed. “I know we’re a lot stronger, but it’s hard to tell against someone as strong as him~”

As Beatrice-san and I tried to puzzle out what they were talking about, though, Class S made their entrance.

Their homeroom teacher smirked at Class F. “I hope you’ll at least try to entertain us.”

Is he cursed so he has to be snide and condescending all the time? It must suck to be him.

They say you can sometimes see someone’s thoughts on their face, but looking at that guy, it was clear he’d never had a decent thought in his life. Even ugly people can look naturally bright and cheery if they smile enough; it was the same for that guy, but in reverse.

Of course, back on Earth, I was ugly and gloomy...

Fortunately, the announcer’s voice snapped me out of my funk.

“All right, it’s now time for the second match-up! This time, we have a battle of extreme opposites—Class S versus Class F!”

“Opposites?” Michael-san echoed dumbly.

“Class S has the best of the best in both academics and magical prowess. Class F is... um... the exact opposite.”

“The opposite? So, they’re dumb?”

“Not exactly. None of them can use magic, though. What I mean is, Class S has the best magic, and Class F has the worst.”

“Okay... So, the school elites and the dropouts?”

“You didn’t hear it from me, folks—at least I tried to sugarcoat it! Anyhow, contestants, get ready!”

Everyone except the first round’s contestants cleared off the field. The only people left were Berard and... Well, I didn’t know how to describe him except as “a white-bread blond boy with dull blue eyes.” He had the same cruel smile as his teacher, and he gave off thug-like vibes—like he was born to stand behind powerful bad guys and smirk evilly, as bad as that sounded.

Is being an asshole some kind of fad? Man, I can never keep up with these trends.

“Okay, it’s time for the first round—Goon-senshu from Class S versus Berard-senshu from Class F—to begin!”

That’s an awful name! Now I almost feel bad for thinking about him so rudely. Forgive me, you poor mob!

“A stereotypical follower,” said a sleepy voice from beside me.

“Don’t say that!” I turned to face the voice and found Origa-chan sitting there. “Wait, Origa-chan? I thought you were watching from the guests’ section with Al?”

“Al-nee-chan said I should watch from over here, since I have the chance. I invited her along, but she said she wouldn’t come since she’s not with Class F.”

“I don’t think she needs to worry about stuff like that, though...”

She might be worried that someone else might call her out for it—like a certain class of elitist pricks and their stupid homeroom teacher, for instance.

While I was chatting with Origa-chan, Goon and Berard also began talking.

“So, you idiots decided to come all this way to get your asses wiped?” he sneered. “I guess I’ve had worse subjects to test my magic on.”

I’ll try to satisfy you, read Berard’s notebook.

Berard didn't seem flustered in the slightest—if anything, I could even feel confidence radiating out from his teddy bear mask.

“Cocky prick!” Goon scoffed, his anger clearly getting the better of him. “I’ll make you eat those words!”

And with that—

“Match #1, Goon-senshu versus Berard-senshu—begin!”

On Lily-san’s mark, Goon took a big leap back and fired off a spell.

“You’ll regret pissing me off! Fire Lance!”

Flames spewed from his hands and smoothly shaped themselves into a spear, which launched itself at Berard. I recognized the spell as a mid-level one with high firepower. If Berard didn’t get out of the way in time, he’d be hurting for sure.

Instead of dodging, however, he wordlessly punched it out of the air.



“... The fuck?”

Goon blinked in surprise as he tried to process what just happened.

Can you at least try to be more careful, Berard?

There was no shortage of healing magic users waiting in the wings in case anyone got hurt, and as per the rules, any attack that wasn't guaranteed to be instantly lethal was allowed. Still, I couldn't believe Berard would try something so reckless.

He cracked his knuckles and gripped his brass knuckles tightly before holding up the next page of his notebook. *Go on. Test some more magic, why don't you?*

“S-Screw that!”

Goon turned bright red with rage as he began chucking spell after spell at Berard—Fireballs, Fire Lances, and every beginner-or intermediate-level Fire spell he could think of. Berard simply continued strolling toward him, only bothering to punch out the spells that would hit him directly as he went.

When he got closer, he started weaving left and right, approaching the opponent with a greater speed and a zigzag pattern. The sheer unpredictability of his movements left Goon in an absolute panic to keep up.

“GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY!!”

In the blink of an eye, however, Berard was behind him, and he brought his heel down on his head with blinding speed.

“Bweh?!”

Goon wavered uneasily for a moment, then fell face-first into the dirt. After making sure he wasn't getting back up, Berard pulled his sketchbook out again. *Is that enough experimenting for you?*

“G-Goon-senshu is down!” Lily-san shouted. “The first round is over! Berard-senshu of Class F wins!”

The bleachers were so silent that you could hear a pin drop.

Normally, it'd take some kind of magic to shut down attacks like that, but Berard pulled it off with the air pressure of his fists. To the spectators, it

probably looked like he brute-forced his way through.

There's no way that's a normal way to fight!

The silence accompanied Berard all the way back to where his classmates were sitting. There, he pulled out his sketchbook again to show Blud. *Your turn. Go beat your brother.*

The Second Prince grinned confidently. “Don’t worry, I will—and I’m going to enjoy it.”

With that, Blud walked out into center field for his bout. Beside me, I could see that Beatrice-san and Leon were still in shock, while Saria continued to cheer him on happily.

Origa-chan tugged on my sleeve. “Seiichi-oniichan?”

“Yeah?”

“Aren’t they supposed to be the worst...?”

“I don’t even know anymore!”

I had no idea how to process Berard’s fight at all, so I decided to just stop thinking altogether.

Chapter 8: Clash of Classes *The Pure-Blooded Prince versus the Tainted-Blood Prince*

“Th-That was a pretty intense fight!” Lily-san stammered over the speaker system. “I couldn’t follow anything Berard-senshu did.”

“I imagine that not many people could,” Michael added. “Allow me to commentate, then. First, Berard-senshu punched Goon-senshu’s spells out of the air as he slowly approached. Then he suddenly broke out in a series of sidesteps to confuse and disorient his foe, which culminated in circling around Goon-senshu as soon as he got within range. What followed was a single strike to the back of the head to knock his opponent out. Honestly, it was an impressive display, beyond anything I’d expect from a student.”

Michael?! What happened to you? You flubbed your way through up to now, and suddenly you explain everything perfectly? Sure, I could follow that, but how were you able to keep up with Berard’s moves?!

“You mean you saw everything that happened?!” Lily-san exclaimed.

“It’s nothing, really,” Michael replied. “Compared to my beloved Meteor Horse, he was moving rather slowly.”

“Okay. Let’s start the next round, then!”

“That’s it?!”

Slowly my ass! And wait, I know that name... Didn’t he win last year’s Capital Derby with that Meteor Horse he mentioned?

He was probably one of the runners-up for that year’s race as well, but since Lulune was still in shock over missing out on eating the Bahamut, I wasn’t at the awards ceremony. Even when I was asking the guy who did win the fish, I didn’t even glance at the other people there.

More importantly, who are you really, Michael?!

He could be an adventurer, but since Barney-san didn't seem to recognize him, he probably wasn't high ranking, or maybe he just didn't take on many of the high-difficulty quests.

But if he's from Terbelle, his rank wouldn't mean a thing.

"Moving on, our next match pits Theobolt-senshu of Class S against Blud-senshu of Class F! This is a fight you don't want to miss, folks!"

"How so?" Michael asked.

"Just between you and me, Theobolt-senshu is the First Prince of the Kaizell Empire, and Blud-senshu is his younger brother. Just between you and me, though, Blud-senshu's mom was a commoner, so they're only half-brothers—and they *really* don't get along!"

"I see. I'm fairly sure the entire school heard that, though."

"Uh... Please forget everything I just said, folks!"

How?!

"More importantly, it looks like we might catch a glimpse into Kaizell's inner politics with this match! Who'd have thought they'd take their baggage from back home out here to the training grounds?"

"And I wouldn't have thought you'd be so loose-lipped."

Right again, Michael! You're on a roll!

I was starting to worry about whether Lily-san would be okay, though. It sounded like she had a beef with the Kaizell Empire—not that I was any different, I guess.

As I watched, though, a blonde-haired boy entered the field to stand opposite Blud. It had to be his brother Theobolt. They had matching longswords, even.

Wait, didn't Al mention something about failing him in her class?

"Brother..." Blud started.

"Don't get full of yourself, you dropout!" Theobolt snapped. "Goon was the weakest member of Class S!"

Wow, I never thought I'd hear someone say that in real life! What is this, a shounen manga?

Blud only clenched his sword. "I... I will defeat you."

"You, defeat me? Hah! When did you get so full of yourself, you rotten half-commoner?"

He didn't reply.

Theobolt's grip tightened. "That face—I *hate* that face! I wish I could break it for good! Wait, I know. Do you remember that maid who lived with Mother? Lilian, was it?"

Even from up in the stands, I could see Blud visibly tensing.

Theobolt sneered, "Let me do you a favor. When I return home, I'll hire her to be my personal maid instead. I've only seen her once, but I suppose she's pretty enough. I'll see to it that she *services* me day in and day out!"

"You wretch!" Blud seethed.

I didn't doubt for a second that Blud would kill him if he got the chance. I didn't know what exactly they were talking about, but it was clear Theobolt was trash.

As I glared at him, though, Saria seemed to be deep in thought beside me.

"Hmm... No, he can't do that."

"Huh?"

"He's a worthless male," Saria asserted. "He's at least as bad as the boys who cornered Lulune and me, maybe worse."

"Okay... What about Blud?"

She smiled at me. "He's fine."

Jeez, animal instincts are crazy.

"Hey, idiot!" Agnos hollered from his seat on the sidelines. "Don't listen to that creep! What happened to your holier-than-thou shit, huh?!"

Blud turned back to face him. "Agnos...?"

“Don’t worry and keep your cool! All you gotta do is beat him so bad he’ll leave you the hell alone!”

I’m not sure Agnos is helping... is he? I guess he has a point.

Blud seemed shocked at first, but he quickly regained his usual confident smile. “Yes... Yes, you’re exactly right.”

Jeez, you’d think they could at least try to settle things peacefully!

Just then, though, Agnos called out to me, “Aniki! Aniki, tell him something encouraging, too!”

“Eh, me? Okay...” I turned toward Blud. “Crush him.”

What’s that? I’m a hypocrite? I have no idea what you mean.

Blud seemed surprised at first, but he quickly went back to smiling even more broadly than before. “And here I thought a teacher, of all people, would encourage a more peaceful solution.”

“Didn’t you just agree to violence yourself?!” I fumed.

Why’s he making it sound like I’m the problem?!

Either way, I had nothing to worry about now. I decided to just sit back and watch the match.

Lily-san’s voice came on again. “It looks like the sparks are already starting to fly! Without further ado, let’s get started! Theobolt-senshu versus Blud-senshu, begin!”

“Hahh!”

As soon as Lily-san gave the signal, Blud swung his sword, sending a blade of sheer force streaking toward Theobolt.

“What’s this?!” Lily-san exclaimed. “Blud-senshu’s fired off an energy slash, and it didn’t even look like he used a Skill!”

“Are we sure Class F are really students?” Michael added amazedly.

I was also a little surprised.

I knew firing off slashes like that was weird. I guess that just hammers home how crazy-powerful Lousse is.

“You’re such a nuisance!” Theobolt hissed as he smoothly dodged Blud’s attack. “Don’t get cocky!”

As the slash bit a groove into the ground and dissipated, Theobolt extended his hand.

“Thunder Lance!”

The spear of lightning zapped toward Blud.

“Kh!”

He managed to dodge it only by a hair before firing off another slash; this time, however, his attack wasn’t even aimed in Theobolt’s direction.

“Hahahahaha! Where are you aiming, loser?! Electrocircle!”

Theobolt waved his hand, creating countless spinning disks of electricity that arced toward his opponent.

“Wow!” Lily-san exclaimed. “That’s a lot of projectiles from Theobolt-senshu!”

“Electrocircle,” Michael mused. “I think that’s an Intermediate Thunder spell.”

Why is he suddenly commentating properly?! What happened to his half-assed additions?! Not that I have any problem with him doing his job, of course!

Once again, Blud was able to dodge most of the attacks, and those he couldn’t avoid, he swatted out of the air with his sword. He swung back in retaliation, but again, his energy slash flew off in the wrong direction.

“What’s wrong?!” Theobolt sneered. “Nobody wants to watch you run around like a coward! Just stand still and let me test a few spells on you!”

Is it just me, or is everyone in Class S a little too eager to test their spells on people? It’s like listening to a bunch of mad scientists.

Nonetheless, Theobolt seemed unable to land even a single spell, and Blud’s attacks didn’t even come close to hitting, resulting in a stalemate of sorts.

“How dare a dirty-blooded faker like you defy your future Emperor-King?!” Theobolt hissed. “Cower in the mud like the peasant you are!”

He continued to fire off spell after spell, attempting to hit Blud by any means possible, but not a single attack hit. Blud was slowly but surely edging closer to his brother, however, hoping to turn the tables somehow.

“How *dare* you approach me!” Theobolt roared. “Drop dead, you worm!”

I couldn’t tell if Theobolt was exasperated or just plain scared. He extended both his arms toward his brother.

“Be grateful—I’ve prepared one last, *special* present for you! Triple Chaser!”

He created three spheres of mana—one fire, one wind, and one lightning—and fired them at Blud.

The Class F student was surprised for only a brief moment and tried to dodge them, but the orbs arced to follow him. “What?!”

“Idiot!” Theobolt sneered. “That spell will chase you until it hits!”

Oh, so it’s that kind of spell.

Instead of trying to shake the spheres off, Blud broke into a sprint toward Theobolt.

“What’s this?!” Lily-san exclaimed. “It looks like Blud-senshu has completely given up on countering the spell and is instead trying to close in on his opponent!”

“I reckon he’s trying to make the spell hit Theobolt instead,” Michael guessed. “Normally, in a battle between mages, he’d only have to create a wall to absorb the attack and that’d be the end of it. It seems that Blud-senshu is incapable of casting after all.”

So that’s what Blud’s trying to do?

He *could* use magic, though—and if he did, he’d be able to turn the tables instantly. For a moment, I thought he was getting overconfident, but I dismissed the possibility just as quickly. He had to have a good reason for his approach.

“You’re so stupid!” Theobolt cackled. “There’s no way you can run away from that spell! If you just give up, I might let you off the hook!”

Blud didn't reply and just continued chasing his opponent. Then, as if he was finally going on the offensive, he leapt through the air toward Theobolt.

"Idiot!" Theobolt laughed. "Now you've got nowhere to run! Fall—Triple Chaser!"

He cast another trio of spheres, closing in on Blud from the front as well as behind now. He backstepped just for good measure, gaining just enough distance that Blud couldn't possibly hit him. Everyone in the stadium was convinced Theobolt had won.

At that moment, though, Blud grinned—the toothy smile of a predator.

"Got you!"

Blud twisted about in the air, stomping hard on the wind-elemental sphere behind him. It instantly exploded with force, but Blud was perfectly positioned to be flung forward with the impact, sending him rocketing in Theobolt's direction.

"Shit!" The older brother panicked, desperately scrambling to get away. However, he tripped almost immediately. "Eep?!"

At his feet was a groove in the earth—the result of one of Blud's energy slashes that had "missed." Theobolt was so determined to hit his brother that he hadn't even noticed all the holes in the ground.

Blud had little trouble closing in on his brother, and he hoisted Theobolt up by the back of his collar. He then held his older brother out like a shield to bear the brunt of his own spells.

"Your gift was in poor taste, so I'll be returning it now."

"S-STOOOOOOOOP!!"

His plea fell on deaf ears, however, as the magic found its mark. When the smoke finally cleared, it revealed Blud without so much as a scratch on him and Theobolt practically burned to a crisp. The battle was clearly over.

"Th-The winner is Blud-senshu of Class F!" Lily-san stammered.

Blud frowned at the charred, battered body of Theobolt in his hands and roughly threw him aside. Then, pulling a handkerchief out of his sleeve, he

wiped his hands disdainfully.

“Why, Brother, you’re filthy. That’s no way for a crown prince to present himself. Here, why don’t you wipe yourself off?”

After dropping the handkerchief on his brother’s unconscious form, he elegantly turned around and strode off the field.

Chapter 9: Clash of Classes *The Strongest Muscle-Brained Delinquent*

Lily-san's voice came over the speakers again. "Who could've expected this?! Class F is pushing Class S back! What an upset!"

"And it's not because Class S is weak—rather, Class F is overwhelmingly strong."

"Yeah, but why?!"

Even my students are stupidly strong now! Of course, they are. I'm just as broken a teacher as I am a... whatever I am! I'm not crying or anything! These are tears of joy!

As Blud returned to where the rest of the boys' team was waiting, he held out his fist to Agnos.

"He's all yours."

"No worries, I got this!"

Agnos eagerly met him in a fist bump.

Man, to be young... and those two get along well after all! Why do they argue all the time, then?!

Looking over at Class S's side of the stands, I could see their homeroom teacher yanking his hair out.

"I-I-Impossible! Of all the... Where's the referee?! They must be cheating! They're all filthy, rotten cheaters!"

I really hope everyone just ignores his accusations.

Fortunately, Lily-san paid him no mind.

"Let's move right along to the next round, then. From Class S we have Gionis-senshu's older brother, Roberto-senshu!"

“The other Windberg brother, eh? If his performance is anything like that spectacular fight we saw in Class A versus Class C, this will be a fight to remember.”

So, Agnos is fighting Landze-san’s son? I wonder what this Roberto guy’s like?

Blud grimaced. “What rotten luck.”

“Huh? Why?” I asked him.

“Perhaps you’re not aware, Seiichi-sensei, but Roberto is the best student in Class S—in other words, he’s the strongest student in the entire school.”

“Whoa...”

He must be crazy good, then.

From the Class S side, a blonde young man with sapphire eyes strode onto the field. He was incredibly handsome, and he had the same kind of regal aura that Blud did. He felt totally different from a regular guy like me.

Blud lamented, “He also happens to be one of the few people in the Academy who treats us decently. He’s a difficult opponent for us in more ways than one.”

“Oh...”

Man, that’s terrible luck! There’s no way he’s going to just go easy and throw the match, and Agnos will have to fight someone who actually likes him!

Agnos shouldered his metal baseball bat as he strutted onto the field.

“Man, of all the guys I gotta fight...”

Roberto bowed. “Please allow me to apologize on behalf of my classmates for the grief we’ve caused you. I’m sincerely sorry.”

“Nah, I don’t really care. Well, okay, obviously I care, but you ain’t got anything to be sorry over.”

“Even if I never harmed you directly, I could have tried harder to keep my classmates in line—not that I’m in any position to direct them in the first place,” he added with a heavy sigh.

Wait, so he’s the strongest, but he’s not one of the main actors in the class? That’s kinda weird... but considering the kind of creeps in Class S, I guess I’m not

that surprised.

“Let’s cut the gloomy chit-chat,” Agnos suggested. “I gotta be honest; I’m *itchin’* to fight you all-out!”

“You are...? In that case, I’d best give you everything I’ve got.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way!”

“What a surprise!” came Lily-san’s surprised voice over the speakers. “It looks like we’ll finally get to see some real sportsmanship for our third round!”

“Honestly, I’m surprised Class S has so many... problematic characters,” Michael added. “I thought the ‘S’ stood for ‘special,’ but maybe it’s for ‘sinister’?”

“That’s an excellent theory, Michael!”

And you just agree with that?!

“More importantly,” Lily-san added, “we’d better get right to it! Roberto-senshu versus Agnos-senshu... BEGIN!”

As soon as she gave the signal, Agnos charged forward. “I got the initiative, blondie! GRAAAAAHH!!”

Blud moaned and cradled his head in his hands. “Idiot! Who in their right mind would charge right at the strongest person in the school without a second thought?! Though I suppose it *is* very much his style...”

Agnos swung for Roberto’s head, but the prince easily dodged the blow and extended his hand.

“Thunder Deluge.”

Countless bolts of electricity began raining down on Agnos from above.

“Shit, it’s raining lightning?! I don’t even have my umbrella!”

I really don’t think that would help you.

Nonetheless, Agnos was able to dodge around every single one on reflexes alone.

It doesn't look like he wants to use magic, either. If he did, he'd be able to do something about that spell without wasting so much stamina.

"I must admit," Roberto mused, "I wasn't expecting you to escape so unscathed."

"I trained against shit a hundred times worse than this! Go easy on me, and I'll rip you in half!"

Agnos closed in on Roberto surprisingly quickly, dodging bolts as he went, and aimed another powerful swing at him. This time, Roberto was forced to block the attack with his longsword. They exchanged a fierce flurry of blows, with neither of them able to even graze the other.

"Not bad!" Agnos shouted. "I thought you could only use your little spells!"

"My magical skill is nothing special, honestly—and I must admit, you're better than I am in a direct fight. In that case..."

After one of Agnos's swings came within a hair of landing, Roberto unleashed a powerful blow of his own. Agnos blocked it, but the sheer impact sent him flying backward.

"Shit, how'd you hit so hard?!"

Agnos was quick to regain his footing, but Roberto had retreated several steps further away and put his hand to the ground.

"Electric Spires."

The ground beneath his hand began radiating light, and a flurry of crackling spikes erupted out of the ground at Agnos.

"Dammit! First above, now below?!"

He attempted to dodge, but it was clearly more difficult than avoiding the attacks from above, and several spikes found their mark.

"Gaaaah!!"

Fortunately, he was able to dodge many of the attacks and deflect the others, barely managing to survive—though an unsettling amount of smoke was rising off of him.

“Shit!” he cursed. “My whole damn arm’s numb!”

“To think you were even able to dodge that,” Roberto said with an amazed shake of his head. “I must admit, I’m starting to lose confidence. I’d best step up my game.”

Neither of them let down their guard as Roberto rolled his shoulders.

Uh oh. I think he’s about to get serious.

“There’s no point in holding back any longer.”

“Huh?”

Roberto closed his eyes for a moment. “You’ve forced my hand. Thunderous Regalia!”

When he opened them, armor made of blinding electricity covered his body. He seemed almost divine. It was exactly flashy enough to appeal to a boy his age.

Agnos’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Holy shit, that’s cool!”

Blud facepalmed. “That idiot!”

Hey! You’re in the middle of a fight!

Interestingly, I didn’t recognize Roberto’s spell at all. Of course, that was when an unfortunately very familiar voice rang through my head.

>You have acquired Unique Thunder Magic: Thunderous Regalia.

Gee, thanks, body. You always know just what to say. Seriously, though, I can even pick up unique spells that easily?! Somebody probably worked their ass off to make that, and I just stole it without even thinking!

As I moaned to myself in regret, Lily-san seemed shocked.

“Wh-What is that spell?! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Just as it appears, it grants the caster armor made of pure lightning,” Michael hesitantly explained. “In addition to providing far better defense than any mundane armor could, it vastly increases the wearer’s speed.”

“You recognize that spell, Michael-san?!”

“Yes. It’s the creation of none other than the Lightning Empress, Eremina Kisa Windberg—an acting S-Rank adventurer.”

“What? Windberg?! Doesn’t that make her Roberto-senshu’s mother?!”

“Precisely. I must admit—I never expected anyone but the Lightning Empress herself to be able to cast that spell.”

Well, you can add me to that list, sorry. And wait, if Roberto’s mom—and Landze-san’s wife—is an S-Rank adventurer, does that mean she’s a pervert, too? I know that’s a rude way to put it, but they haven’t exactly left a great impression on me so far. I mean, we’re talking about Eris-san, Gustle-san, and Gargarand-san here!

That would mean that she was also a queen, and that would explain why I never met Landze-san’s wife. She was probably out questing at the time.

Talk about a hands-on approach to the kingdom’s problems!

Roberto grimaced a little. “Unfortunately, I can’t maintain the Regalia for as long as Mother can. However—”

He seemed to waver for a second before closing in on Agnos with terrifying speed.

“Shit!” Agnos cursed. He reflexively raised his bat defensively, but the impact of the prince’s sidelong swipe still sent him flying across the battlefield like a discarded doll.

“—it’ll be more than enough to end this.”

From there, the fight was one-sided. All manner of slashes, punches, and kicks pelted Agnos from all sides. I could barely follow Roberto’s movements with my eyes, but to everyone else, he must have been moving so fast as to be totally invisible. The massive gashes and craters that seemed to explode out of the ground all around Agnos proved just how powerful each of Robert’s attacks were.

Agnos didn’t have the time to block, let alone counter. He was visibly growing more and more injured with every passing second—it hurt just to watch him. I was honestly surprised he was still conscious.

“Gh!”

Agnos didn't so much as falter, however. I could see from the look in his eyes that he was hellbent on surviving the onslaught.

Roberto's face twisted with shock. “How are you still going?!”

“I wasn't trained to be no wimp!” Agnos spat back.

“I suppose I have little choice, then.” A disconcertingly large cluster of electric arrows formed at Roberto's back. “I can't hold back any longer. This is my full power!”

Agnos grinned, readying his bat to swing. “Bring it! I'll crack you wide open!”

“Blistering Thunderlance!”

The countless spears flew into the air, forming a single massive bolt of crackling lightning that shot toward Agnos at breakneck speed.

“This's the biggest hit you'll ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, EVER see!”

He swung at the spear, taking its full force head-on. Sparks and flashes exploded out of the point where the bat met the spell, testament to the sheer power that was being exchanged.

“YOU AIN'T GOT THE GUTS TO BEAT ME!” Agnos roared, blood flying from his lips as the lightning bolt was slowly forced back. “THIS IS REAL FIGHTING SPIRIT!”

Finally, he completely knocked the spear away.

Damn, that vocabulary. I'm jealous.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

“HAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

Agnos wasted no time in rushing Roberto.

Roberto's armor had already sputtered and flickered out. He had no energy left—but still, he swung with everything he had at Agnos, howling with exertion. And then—

“...”

“...”

Agnos's bat was stopped at Roberto's neck. Roberto's sword halted a hair from Agnos's throat. The entire battlefield was bathed in silence for a long moment before Lily-san finally spoke.

“Wh-What...?! I can't believe it, folks! We have a draw! I repeat, it's a draw!”

Sure enough, their final blows were perfectly synchronized, even to my senses. In other words, neither of them won.

At the sound of the announcement, both combatants lowered their weapons.

“A draw, eh?” Roberto mused. “No... if you were able to use magic, I would've lost for certain.”

Agnos snorted. “Yeah, right! That's my full power. Sure, magic's nice, but it ain't half as good as my trusty muscles!”

“I suppose so. At any rate, I enjoyed myself tremendously.”

“Same! That was real fun!”

They shook hands, and with that, the draw was official.

“Um... Since Class F doesn't have anyone else on their team who can fight, I guess this match is a draw?”

“It's certainly not a satisfying conclusion,” Michael added with a hint of discontent. “Their team size aside, they have a clear 2-0 advantage... though I suppose out of five rounds, two wins and a tie *would* lead to a draw.”

As the announcers discussed the results, one of the students of Class S stomped onto the field. He looked surprisingly similar to Leon, but without any of the stress or anxiety. He glared over at our bench.

“A draw? Yeah, right! You've got someone who can still fight! You're throwing the whole damn match, that's what!”

What's he even saying? Even if Leon wanted to fight, another loss would just mean Class S loses instead of ties. If anything, they should be grateful they're getting off so easily after losing two rounds.

“Seriously, what’s your problem?!” the Leon-lookalike shouted. “You’re just gonna sit your fat ass on your bench and let it end like this?! Sounds just like you! You’re just worried your cheating’s gonna get revealed! You know how it *really* went. We just went easy on you peasants because you can’t even use magic! I could crush you with my eyes closed! You’ve never even worked a damn day in your lives, and you’ll never be anything more than wretched little worms!”

Uh... Was he even watching his classmates fight? Even if he’s serious, he’s just putting his own team down for losing to “worms.” I say let him go off on his crazy rant.

Blud and the others were clearly upset by the boy’s accusations, but none of them said anything.

Just as I was shaking my head at the boy’s stupidity, though, I realized that Leon had stood up beside me. He didn’t say a word.

“L-Leon...?” I muttered, completely unprepared for what he’d do next.

Chapter 10: Clash of Classes *The Fated Battle of the Brothers*

Everyone stopped to stare at Leon as he walked from the bleachers out onto the grounds.

Blud was the first to come to his senses.

“Hey, Leon! What are you—”

“Take that back!” Leon shouted, raising his voice for the first time since I’d met him.

The other student grinned, turning to face off against him. “What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I said, take it back!”

“Who died and made you the boss of me, you little shit?! That’s no way to talk to your brother!”

Leon flinched, but after taking a deep breath, he turned to meet the other boy’s gaze.

“I don’t care! I want you to apologize for insulting my friends right now!”

“Insulting? What, does the truth hurt that much? You hate to hear it that much? You’re the same magicless little maggot you’ve always been!”

“So what?! I don’t care if you call me names, but you have no right to ignore my classmates’ efforts, you... you jerk!”

“‘Jerk?’ Looks like somebody forgot his manners. I’ll make you regret getting in my way!”

“I won’t regret anything—and I’ll never, *ever* forgive you for what you’ve done.”

Tension sparked between the two.

So, I guess... that kid is Leon's brother? And it sounds like he's also the source of his trauma.

"Wh-What do you think this means, Michael-san?" Lily-san worriedly said into her microphone.

"How should I know? I can't begin to guess what happened between them. All I know is that this seems destined to happen sooner or later."

"Yeah, I guess... and if they're squaring off in the arena, that must mean they're going to fight! Not that any of us signed up for more family drama!"

"I couldn't agree more."

Yeah, totally! They don't have to do this in front of the whole school!

"But who cares!" Lily-san continued. "If they want to fight, let them fight!"

Seriously?! Can't she read the mood?! Although I guess this is better than just watching them argue...

"All right, since both parties seem to be consenting, let's rock and roll! Freid-senshu of Class S versus Leon-senshu... BEGIN!"

On Lily-san's mark, the fight began.

My attention was immediately taken by five orbs of light that formed around Leon.

"Huh?" I rubbed my eyes. "What's that floating around Leon?"

Blud cast me an odd look. "What? I don't see anything."

Berard held up his sketchbook. *Is something there?*

"I don't think anything's there~" Rachel added confusedly.

From the looks of it, not even Saria or Lulune could see what I'd spotted around him.

Maybe I'm going crazy?

I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed something off. Only Barney-san was staring at him with genuine shock in his eyes.

Okay, so only Barney-san and I see the lights? That's... really weird.

The five spheres of light—red, blue, yellow, green, and orange—bobbed and dipped around him gleefully, as if they were alive. Leon had noticed the orbs and seemed to be talking to them.

His brother, Freid, turned bright red with rage. “H-How dare you... The duel’s only just begun, and you’re *ignoring me?!?*”

Jeez, the kid’s got a temper. Maybe it’s a calcium deficiency or something? Go drink some milk.

I ignored him, of course, turning my attention to Leon’s conversation with the lights. Sure enough, I could faintly hear inhuman voices.

“Finally, you can hear us!”

“Yay, yay!”

“I was so scared it’d all go to waste!”

“We’re glad you’re back on your feet!”

“Friendship power, goooo!!”

They sounded almost childlike in their happiness.

“Wh-Who are you?” Leon stammered.

“We’re spirits!”

“But not any spirits—we’re Greater Spirits!”

“We’re Fire, Water, Air, Earth, and Thunder!”

“S-Spirits?” Leon repeated dumbly.

If they were spirits, that made a little more sense. Barney-san was an elf, and I had my Clairvoyance Skill, which explicitly stated I could see invisible things.

The Spirits bobbed around him, bubbling with glee.

“We’ve been waiting forever!”

“You can finally use magic again!”

“We’re sorry... We couldn’t help you at all, even though you had it so hard.”

“We can’t help you without a contract.”

“When you were younger, we were too strong for you.”

“But not now!”

Leon stared in surprise. “A contract... with me? Why?”

“It has to be you! Has to be!”

“Yeah!”

“We all want contracts with you!”

Their voices sounded desperate.

Leon dropped his gaze. “I... I’m still scared of magic. No, not magic—I’m scared of my brother.”

“...”

“I tried to be brave, but I can’t beat him. I want to give up already.”

“...”

“But... he can’t get away with talking to my friends like that.”

“Leon...” One of the Spirits drooped sadly.

“If I contract with you, can I beat him? C-Can someone like me... move on?”

“Of course!”

Light filled the space between Leon and the Greater Spirits, and as the glow began to solidify, a mark similar to the spirits formed on the back of his hand.

“Wh-What’s this?” he stammered uncertainly.

“It’s the proof of our bond!”

“We’ll show you what we can do!”

“Now you’re strong enough to protect your friends!”

“And we can finally protect you!”

“We’ll show that guy just how powerful we Greater Spirits can be!”

I turned back to look at Freid. He seemed even more furious than before.

“How *dare* you ignore me?!” he seethed. “You’re *nothing*! What gives you the right to look down on me?!”

“Why is he so angry?” I wondered aloud.

“Freid’s been trash-talking him for a while now,” Blud responded. “Leon’s ignored his every word so far.”

Really? I didn’t even hear him—actually, I’m kind of impressed that he just stood there, swearing at the air, while Leon talked to himself. He must really have a way with words—not that anyone would want to be that good at swearing.

Finally, Freid’s patience had run out. He extended his arms and began to cast.

“I’ll force you to remember every sweet second of your trauma! Now, cry! Beg for me to stop!” Fire twisted out of his arms, forming a long spear. “We had enough fun with Fireball back then, but now I’ve got a Fire Lance for you! I’ll love listening to your insides boil!”

Shit, that’s graphic!

He threw the spear at Leon.

“Aaagh?!” he screamed in panic.

“It’s okay!” hummed a spirit. *“We’ve got you!”*

“I’ll protect you!” exclaimed another.

The motes of light flew forward to protect Leon, still chirping excitedly.

“No human can beat us!”

“We’ll give him what he deserves for being so mean to you!”

“Take this! True Fire Lance!”

“True Earth Wall!”

“True Water Ball!”

“True Lightning!”

“True Storm!”

As they cast, everyone around me stared. Apparently, they were visible now.

“What’s that light?” Blud muttered.

“It’s so pretty~” Rachel gushed.

Flora’s eyes glittered. “Whoa! So, Leon-kun has magic now, too!”

She wasn’t exactly right, but he definitely had a power to call his own now.

Compared to Freid’s Fire Lance, however, the red spirit’s True Fire Lance was not only far bigger—it absorbed the other spell as it flew, growing even larger and brighter.

“Huh?!” the bully started.

Around him, walls of earth rose to cut off any hope he had of escaping.

“Why? How?!” Freid cried. “Magic?! That’s not pos—GAAAAAAHH!!”

The massive streak of flame hit him square in the chest, ravenously spreading to engulf his entire body in fire.

“HOT! Hot, hot, hot, hot, HOOOOOOOT!!”

He desperately swatted at his clothes in a desperate attempt to extinguish himself, but the fire only grew more intense.

Uh. Okay.

Fortunately, I wasn’t grossed out for long. A massive orb of water crashed down on him, snuffing out the flames and crushing him flat against the ground in the process.

“Gwff?!”

The water swept away soon enough, but it wasn’t over. A massive bolt of lightning plummeted out of the sky, crashing right into him.

“GzZzZzZzZzZzZzZzZzZzZT!!”

Just like in an old manga, I could clearly see his skeleton through his skin. After a long, few seconds, the charge finally dissipated, and he was left lying unceremoniously sprawled in the dirt. He was charred from head to foot, and what remained of his hair was standing on end. Even without the announcer’s declaration, it was clear he had lost.

Finally, he had gotten his just deserts for his miserable behavior.

Apparently, though, that wasn't the end of it. A small tornado touched the ground moments later, tearing through the training grounds until it finally reached him and tossed him into the air like a child's doll.

"Oof," I grunted as I watched the gale-force wind yank out the remainder of his hair, leaving a smooth dome of skin that could outshine the sun itself. It had no chance to do so, however, as he was driven headfirst into the earth seconds later.

The entire arena was dead silent, except for the chirping of the spirits.

"How's that?!"

"Learned your lesson? Now stay away from Leon!"

"Yeah, stay away!"

"We're Leon's friends, and his special power!"

I couldn't help but ponder. *W-Well, uh... I'm sure everyone will have their own take on this totally normal and average event.*

It was as one-sided as it was cruel.

Lily-san seemed to recover first, and after an awkward pause, she declared the winner.

"U-Um... I guess the winner is Leon-senshu from Class F?"

No wonder she was shocked—but nobody seemed as flabbergasted as Leon himself. He stared blankly at his brother for a long moment before suddenly collapsing.

Chapter 11: Elite Teacher versus Dropout Teacher

Blowout

“L-Leon?!” I shouted.

The Greater Spirits were in a panic.

“Oh, no, no, no!”

“Oops! We went too far!”

“Leon didn’t have enough mana for all those spells at once...”

“What do we do now?!”

“Wake up, Leon!”

So, he ran out of mana?

As I rushed out onto the field to make sure he was okay, a mechanical voice rang out in my head.

>You have acquired Greater Spirit Magic: Fire. You have acquired Greater Spirit Magic: Water. You have acquired Greater Spirit Magic: Air. You have acquired Greater Spirit Magic: Earth. You have acquired Greater Spirit Magic: Thunder.

“Guh?!” I spewed blood and collapsed.

“Seiichi?!” Saria cried out worriedly.

What the actual hell?! Greater Spirit magic, just out of the blue like that? How? Why? Isn’t there supposed to be a contract involved?

It took me a while to recover from that sudden psychic attack, but as soon as I was able to stand up again, I rushed back to Leon’s side.

As I scooped him up, I turned to the spirits.

“So, uh, I want to take him to the infirmary so he can rest. Is that okay?”

Sure enough, the lights wavered uncertainly.

“Um... I guess that’s okay...”

“You can see us?!”

“You’re not an elf, either—you’re human!”

My gaze drifted. “I... would rather not talk about that. It’s depressing.”

“Huh?” One of them flickered awkwardly. *“S-Sorry... We didn’t mean to.”*

“Nah, don’t worry about it. C’mon, let’s get going.”

I didn’t want them to feel bad about it or anything.

As I was about to head off the field, though, somebody called out to me from Class S’s benches.

“Stop! How dare you tarnish my gilded career?!”

“Huh?”

Sure enough, it was their teacher—Cliff-sensei, or something like that. He looked furious.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“Bah! Have you forgotten how to think, peasant? What a poor, miserable creature you are!”

Why’s he insulting me this time?

He jabbed an accusing finger at me. “My career has been flawless up until *you* ruined it. Do you know what that means?!”

“Nope. Not a clue.”

“What?!”

Seriously, what’s the big deal? He’s throwing a tantrum about his track record when his own student is still jammed headfirst into the ground? Pretty shitty of him.

“It looks like we have even more drama on the grounds, folks!” blared Lily-san’s voice.

“What will come of it, I wonder?” came Michael-san’s voice.

Could you two stop gawking and at least pretend to be professionals?! I mean, is this even allowed?!

I was fine just cutting it off there, but I got the feeling that the man-child frowning at me wouldn’t let it go so easily. I glanced over at Barney-san, but he only chuckled amusedly at this latest turn of events.

Isn’t somebody going to stop this?!

The more I looked around, the clearer it was that it wasn’t going to end so easily. The audience was eager to see me get beaten to a pulp by Cliff-sensei. Only a few people, like Al and the folks from Class F, seemed worried about me. Not Saria or Lulune, though—they were smiling expectantly.

I was expecting something to change after everyone saw Class F blow through the strongest team in the event, but I guess not. If anything, these guys seem more eager than ever to see us get cut down to size. They wanna see me get ripped in half. Man, I can’t catch a break!

I turned and started walking away. “Anyhow, I’ve gotta get Leon looked at. See you later.”

I’d barely taken more than a few steps when Agnos suddenly cried out.

“Aniki! Look out!”

He was frantically pointing behind me. It wasn’t just him, either—all of Class F was in a panic. Turning around, I found a spear of flame about a foot from my face. It was a Fire Lance, the same kind I’d seen plenty of during the other matches.

The spirits, hearing Flora and Rachel’s screams, tried frantically to shield me—but without any mana, they were helpless. It was clear that I was going to get hit.

Clear to everyone but me, that is.

I reflexively caught the spear out of the air with my open hand.

“Oof, that was close!”

Cliff-sensei stared at me in shock, his mouth hanging open loosely.

Huh. You'd think touching fire would hurt, but this thing isn't even warm. This... This is a totally normal, human thing to do, right?

Finally, Cliff-sensei recovered from his surprise. Face twisting with rage, he began throwing a flurry of Fire and Thunder Lances alike.

"You slaving serf! What the hell did you do?!"

"Wha?!"

No matter how many projectiles he slung at me, though, I effortlessly flicked them all away with the Fire Lance in my hands. I even caught three of them between my fingers just for kicks and tossed all four of them back in his direction. They hungrily overpowered his own attacks, and as they exploded into the ground around his feet, they sent showers of dirt and debris flying sky-high.

"Eeeep?!" he squeaked in terror.

"Oops."

I thought I was holding back as much as I could... How'd they have so much oomph?

When the smoke cleared, I saw that Cliff-sensei had fallen hard on his butt, eyes wide with primal fear.

Well, at least he shouldn't attack me again.

As I turned to leave for the second time, however, his shrill scream hit my ears.

"How *dare* you make such a mockery of me?!"

"I what?"

I looked back to find that he'd thrown a new spell at me, this one many times bigger than his earlier attacks.

Attacking someone when their back is turned is a pretty shitty move on its own, but a spell like that would totally vaporize most people. Not that I'm most people, I have no doubt about that!

Rather than feeling threatened, I was just annoyed that he was still bothering me. I had a kid to take to the infirmary, after all. I glared at the spell—and to my shock, it *froze in place*.

“Huh?” Cliff-sensei muttered dumbfoundedly. He was even more shocked than when I had caught his Fire Lance.

“Whoa.”

For a long moment, we both stared in confusion—I had no idea what I had done, after all.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” he finally stammered, finding his anger once more. “What is going on here? Why hasn’t that filth been reduced to ash?!”

No matter how loudly he yelled or pleaded with the spell, however, it was frozen, as if terrified of something... No, terrified of *me*. As I watched, it began to tremble uneasily, then started drifting back toward Cliff-sensei, slowly building speed as it went.

“What...”

“Huh?”

We exclaimed in surprise at almost the same time. It took Cliff-sensei a second to realize his spell was returning to the sender.

“What?! No no no no no no, stop, STOP! I cast you! Why are you targeting me now? Why are you so much faster than when I cast you?! How are you even multiplying on your way back to me?! Y-You, you... foul peasant WRETCH! What did you do?!”

“Uh... I don’t know?”

“OW?! Stop that! Stop it, stop! Stop, I said! GO AWAAAAAAAAAAAY!!”

KER-DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!!

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?!”

For a good thirty seconds, the giant pillars of mana thudded all around Cliff-sensei with startling speed and brutality.

“Oof.” I winced as I watched it all unfold.

Finally, the remaining pillars froze in the air, and as if worried about my reaction, they hesitantly turned back to “face” me.

What the hell is even going on here?

I shook my head in confusion, but the spell seemed to take that in the wrong way and the barrage instantly resumed on Cliff-sensei.

“GYAGH?! AAAAAHHHH!! GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

Finally, after nearly a minute of listening to his strange screams, the magic froze in the air again and turned back toward me. I was still shaking my head in disbelief, but as soon as I realized the magic was somehow taking this as permission to continue, I hurriedly stopped.

“N-No, wait! Stop hitting the poor guy! He doesn’t have an ounce of life left in him... and why am I even trying to talk to a spell?!”

The only thing about this mess I get is that Cliff-sensei can’t take much more of this! How is his own spell doing this?!

Apparently, the spell “heard” what I was saying, and after a sigh of relief—though it didn’t have an expression or probably even emotions—the magic disappeared entirely. When the dirt and debris had finally cleared enough that I could see Cliff-sensei, I found him lying splayed on the ground, his eyes rolled back in his head. He was covered in dirt, but it was still clear he was naked and bald, and he was in the middle of what seemed to be a puddle of his own pee.

...

“All right, to the infirmary we go.”

Without another thought, I turned around and carried Leon out of the training grounds.

Chapter 12: Under Attack

I let out a long sigh of relief. Leon was now safely in the infirmary, and I was heading back toward the training grounds. There wasn't any nurse there today, either, but I figured they had to be somewhere. There had to be someone in charge, even if I'd never seen them before.

More importantly, I wanted to know how the hell magic just did whatever I said.

What the hell did that spell want from me? Forget that—how was that even possible?

I opened my Status. There was nothing new with my Stats or Skills or anything, but there was a puzzling new entry under Titles.

>MANIPULATOR OF MAGICS: As it sounds.

What the hell?! This doesn't explain anything, and that description, if you could even call it that, is a disgrace!

Either way, it was clearly the reason behind whatever just happened.

"Hahh... Fine, whatever. I guess I'd better get back."

I bottled up my confusion and shuffled back to the arena.

Oh, right—that Perseverance Skill or whatever's gonna make my Stats skyrocket because of this, isn't it? Hahaha...

"God, I hate this so much!"

※ ※ ※

It was some time after Seiichi had left carrying Leon that the audience and participants finally recovered enough to speak.

"What the hell was that?"

“I couldn’t really follow, but that Class S teacher got his ass handed to him, right?”

“Just who was that robed teacher guy?”

“What’s a guy like him doing with Class F?”

Nobody could fully puzzle out what had happened. Finally, Lily’s voice came back over the mana speakers.

“I-I was so startled by that; I think I passed out!”

“It was extremely puzzling, for sure,” Michael agreed.

“Yeah... Either way, it’s clear that this round is over! Class S Boys versus Class F Boys, the winner is Class F by a landslide!”

Almost nobody applauded. They didn’t want to accept that the trash of the Academy had somehow beaten the very best of the best.

Lily faltered, sensing the mood in the arena shift dangerously. She considered skipping over the round between the classes’ girls altogether, but that was strictly against the rules. She had no choice but to proceed.

“Get ready, folks, because next is Class S Girls versus Class F Girls! Who will emerge on top? Nobody knows!”

“I imagine Class F will dominate again.”

“Darn it, Michael-san, read the mood! I just wanna go home!”

Before the commentators’ banter could continue, however, a dark, swirling shadow began to build in the center of the arena. Nobody could react—it was too sudden. Only Barnabus could tell that there was a great evil lurking in that abyss, and he leapt from the stands into the grounds to confront it.

As soon as he hit the ground, however, great rings of light formed around him, tightly binding his arms and legs. He feebly fell to the ground.

“Wh-What in the world is happening?!” he exclaimed.

The stands were dead silent, unable to follow what had just happened to the headmaster.

Finally, two humanoid forms emerged from the black whirlpool. One was a man in a white labcoat, and the other, a noblewoman in a black-and-white gothic dress. The man was wearing thick glasses, and despite his handsome face and peaceful smile, something about the way he carried himself was deeply unsettling. The woman had the left half of her face covered by a featureless white mask. It was clear from the other half of her face, however, that she was beautiful and that her lips were curled into a smile; however, something about her expression was disturbingly sadistic.

The man stepped forward as he addressed the crowd. “Greetings, everyone. I am Demioros of the Cult of the Wicked One. Sudden as it is, you’re all going to die.”

Nobody replied, though it was more because of their confusion rather than fear.

Demioros’s grin deepened. “You don’t understand, do you? Allow me to make myself clear.”

He snapped his fingers, and the rings of light binding Barnabus began to viciously writhe and tighten around him.

“Gaaaaaaaahh!!”

The old man’s scream was the wakeup call they needed. In an instant, the stands descended into chaos.

“Shit, he’s got the headmaster!”

“What the hell?!”

“W-We’re gonna die? What kind of sick joke is this?!”

“What’s the Cult of the Wicked One?”

The villains grinned with pleasure.

“Excellent,” the woman mused. “The screams alone will be a wonderful offering to His Malevolence.”

“Oh, no, Angreia. This is only the beginning. They’ve yet to taste *true* fear.”

With that, Demioros approached the old man and planted a vicious kick in his back.

“Gh?!”

“Hahaha! My, what a pitiful sight you are, Great Sage! Without your magic, you’re nothing but a feeble old man!”

Barnabus glared up at him. “Th-This is the Ultimate Light Magic, Brilliant Binding...”

“I suppose I should praise your knowledge—not that it’ll be of any use to you.”

A few students began to flee the stands while Demioros was distracted, but he only smirked with amusement.

“Don’t think you can run from me now. I’ve enchanted all the exits, and I wouldn’t count on help from the outside. After all, it’ll be over *far* too quickly for anyone to make it in time.”

Silence once again descended upon the stands.

“Still,” he continued, “I must admit my preparations were worth it. The process was far more laborious than regular Dimensional Magic, but setting the spell to activate whenever a particular target got on stage did make it that much easier to take them hostage.”

With that, he grabbed Cliff-sensei by the neck and hoisted him into the air. When he realized the state the teacher was in, however, he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Wh-Why is he nearly dead already?” he muttered worriedly.

That wasn’t part of the plan. He kept on smiling, all the while trying to hide his mounting unease.

“I-It doesn’t matter,” he told himself, then turned to address the crowd. “Either way, I still hold your fates in my hands. The Great Sage is mine to do with as I please. As it would be rather dull to kill you outright, why don’t we make a game of it?”

“A game...?” Barnabus moaned, gritting his teeth to try and withstand his pain.

“Yes, a game! You’ll each have an opportunity to fight me one-on-one. If you win, everyone goes free. Lose the game, however, and you lose your life.” He paused for dramatic effect, but was met only with petrified silence. “You’re free to break the rules and assault me in whatever numbers you deem fit—but you’d best be confident you can avoid the magical countermeasures I’ve set to avoid such foul play.”

Clearly, not even Barnabus had noticed the traps Demioros had set, and none of the spectators were bold enough to try their luck.

He nodded contentedly to himself. “Good. I’m glad you’re all willing to listen to reason. Either way, you’ll all be trapped here until one of you can defeat me.”

“Wait a minute, Demioros,” Angreia cut in. “You didn’t mention anything about this. What am I supposed to do?”

“Hm? Ah, yes, I nearly forgot. Your role is every bit as important, I promise.”

“Important?” Her right eyebrow rose interestedly.

Before she could utter another word, however, the magic circle at her feet lit up, and the chains of light that emerged bound her in the blink of an eye.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!”

“Can’t you tell? I thought you, of all people, would know the unique flavor of despair born from someone believing they were safe until the very instant mortal danger is upon them.”

She paled. “You... You can’t be serious!”

“I’ll admit it was short-sighted of me to never have attacked this Academy before, but I’m not interested in collaborating with anyone for any reason. I know your true nature, ‘Slaughter Princess.’ You can only whisper those twisting words to the other Servants, bending them to your will and adamantly refusing to dirty your own hands. You’re even more of a coward than I am. Worst of all, I can tell that despite your fervent declarations of fealty to the

Wicked One, you haven't *truly* fallen into darkness at all. Now that your magic is set in place, I'm done with you."

"B-But even if that's true, if you kill me, my magic will all be undone. Are you sure you want that?"

He chuckled. "I know it made it *seem* like I was casting alongside you, but I'm afraid I'm quite miserable with magic in general. All I can do is set my little traps and the Brilliant Binding you're now *very* familiar with. I'm especially miserable with offensive magic. If you can recognize this lovely trinket, however, you'll see what I'm getting at."

With that, he pulled out an ebony-black metal collar.

"Wh-What?!"

"This is a Collar of Subordination. I assume you know what will happen as soon as I put it on you?"

"N-No... Stay away from me!"

Angreia frantically tried to squirm away from him, but the rings of light held her firmly in place. He stopped to watch her futile struggle for a moment before leaning down to tightly clamp his hand around her neck. As he did so, the chains of light broke and dissipated.

"There," he announced. "You're now mine to do with as I please. You couldn't defy me even if your miserable life depended on it."

"You wretched...!"

She leapt at him, but before she could so much as touch him, the collar flashed, and her every nerve exploded with pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?!"

"You have no right to defy me—or any rights at all, for that matter. I own you, from now until the very moment of your death."

Angreia collapsed weakly to her knees, panting heavily, but she still had just enough energy to glare darkly at him.

“D-Don’t you dare think... you can get away with... torturing another Servant! The Wicked One will—”

Demioros tut-tutted her. “You seem to be misunderstanding. *You’re not a Servant*. You never have been.”

“What?”

She understood each of his words alone, but together, they made no sense.

“You see,” he explained, “Servants receive a portion of the Wicked One’s power in order to see his dark will done. A Mark appears on them to signify this pact, such as this.”

He unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a tattoo of a warped shield emblazoned with a grinning demon. She froze at the sight of it.

“Where’s your Mark?” he asked playfully.

She had no idea such a thing even existed.

“It’s quite funny, if you think about it,” he continued, the amusement in his voice growing. “Your magical talents and intellect were enough to string you along and use you all this time. That’s why the true Servants listened to you and did your bidding. You had a knack for malice that was hard to come by. But every time I saw you boast of your Servanthood, every time I saw you act like part of our cult... Hahahahaa!!”

Angreia’s face was—

“Yes, *your face!*” he howled. “I need to see your expression!”

He grabbed her roughly by the hair, yanking her closer and reaching for her mask with his free hand.

“Wh-What are you... Stop! Please, stop it!”

“You won’t be needing this anymore.”

With that, he ripped the featureless thing off her face, revealing a large, rough burn.

“Hahahaha! You’re hideous! You absolutely *disgust* me, Angreia! Oh, I’ve never laid eyes on anything so vile!”

She let out a feeble moan.

“I know exactly how you stumbled upon our little band, you know. You were once a real noble, the ruler of a now-gone land. You were engaged, even. Your relationship with your betrothed was as pure as freshly driven snow, and you were beloved by fellow nobles and commoners alike. Your life was nothing but perfect until that fateful day when your land was burned to unrecognizable ash.”

She flinched, but if he noticed, it only encouraged him.

“The very earth itself roiled with flame as your people frantically scrambled for shelter from the desolation! You managed to escape, of course, but only at the cost of half your face. Oh, how beautiful you once were, in your appearance and your joy alike! Watching you frantically roll about, desperately trying to extinguish those hungry flames, was indeed amusing. Your own family shunned you, and even your beloved fiancé wanted nothing to do with you! You lost everything you had and everything you were in that blaze. What a tragedy it all was!”

“H-How... How do you know that?!”

“Can’t you tell? The instigator of that fire was none other than *me*. It was hilarious, satisfying to no end! That visceral joy of tearing down everything someone holds dear and casting them into the depths of despair! That sweet agony on your fractured face! Ahahahaha! To be honest, even if such violence wasn’t essential for returning the Wicked One to life, I would have adored it all the same! So, thank you, Angreia, for satisfying me so thoroughly!”

“N-No... Please stop...”

“Are you upset? Depressed? Angry, maybe? Whatever that horrible feeling may be, it will slake His Malevolence’s endless thirst! Go on, scream! Cower! Give birth to more darkness for the Wicked One!”

Drunk on his sadistic joy, he roughly threw her down and stomped on her with his full weight.

“That scarred mess you call a face deserves to be in the dirt! Go on, rub the dust into it!”

“You wretched man!” Barnabus hissed. “How dare you treat your own ally with such cruelty?!”

Sweat beaded on the sage’s brow as he struggled to break free, but to no avail. Demioros shot him a disinterested look.

“‘Ally’? Who could you be referring to?”

The look in his eyes made Barnabus’s blood run cold. The spectators unfortunate enough to see his eyes reacted the same way. Something in his words carried a fear that they’d never even imagined before that moment. Even Saria could feel the sickly weight to his words, that awakened a primal fear deep within her.

She shivered. “He’s so scary...”

“Rest assured,” Lulune declared. “I shall protect you from that villain!”

She was not the first to react, however.

“Cut the shit already!” Agnos shouted, slowly but surely willing his trembling legs forward. “Why don’t you dumb it down so an idiot like me can understand?!”

“Agnos?!” Saria called out to him, but he didn’t turn back.

“What’s this?” Demioros mused.

“You talk all fancy. Cut the crap and say what you mean!”

“Is that so? Then die.”

“That’s too blunt, asshat!”

Still, his anger had helped restore some clarity to his thoughts.

“Stop, Agnos-kun!” Beatrice shouted after him. “Get back here this instant!”

He turned back. “No can do. He made fun of me, and now I’m gonna kick his ass!”

“You *are* an idiot, you realize,” Blud said calmly as he likewise headed onto the field.

“What was that?!” Agnos snarled.

Beatrice's worry deepened. "Not you, too, Blud-kun!"

"Frankly, I couldn't care less who you are," Blud called out as he approached the sadist. "Even if your intentions in coming here are pure evil, that woman shared your goals. I can't watch you debase and humiliate her in good conscience."

Demioros raised an eyebrow. "Really? What are you going to do about it?"

"And you called me dumb!" Agnos snorted. "We're gonna rip you in half!"

He broke into a run, swinging his bat at the man's head.

"How foolish," Demioros sighed as he *vanished*.

"Huh?!"

"As it happens," his voice continued from seemingly out of nowhere, "I'm quite adept in martial combat."

The next instant Agnos saw him, he'd just unleashed a sharp kick into the boy's gut, sending him flying across the training ground.

"Gah?!"

"Agnos!" Blud shouted after him.

After finally crashing to a halt, Agnos picked himself up and wiped away the blood trickling out of his mouth. "Shit, that hurt! Why da hell're you that strong? You seemed as fast as Aniki even!"

None of the spectators were able to follow Demioros's movements either. Even for Seiichi's companions, he was far too fast to see.

"Do you understand?" Demioros smirked. "This is the true power of a Servant—of the Wicked One! But more importantly, since you stepped forward... Well, you know the rules."

A chill ran down Blud's spine, and he reflexively raised his sword in defense. Demioros's punch shattered the steel blade on its way to Blud's chest, catching him square-on and sending him flying back, just like Agnos.

"Guh?!"

“Is that all you’ve got? I was holding back quite a bit, you know. What a terrible shame. At least we finally have our first casualties.”

Demioros closed the distance to Agnos in the blink of an eye, and his arm snapped out to catch the student by the neck.

“Gh?!”

“Now for the real question—how exactly will you die? Asphyxiation, or of a broken neck?”

“Like hell I’ll let you do either.”

Altria jumped down from the stands, landing in the arena. Demioros threw Agnos aside as he put some distance between himself and his new challenger.

“Sorry,” she apologized to Agnos as he lay groaning in the dirt. “I was too scared to move for a minute there, but I got over it. I’m gonna give that freak a beating.”

I’ll help you, read Berard’s notebook as he took her side. He flipped to the next page. *I think I have a history with him, too, just like the lady lying over there.*

“A history?” Al shot him a curious look, but Berard just put his sketchbook away.

“Hm. Two more at once, I see,” Demioros muttered. “Not that it’ll make any difference how many adventurers or students you throw at me.”

“Shut it!” Altria shouted as she brought her axe to bear on him.

Berard followed close behind her, his knuckles tensing as he prepared to follow up.

He sighed. “What a shame. You’d both get your chance either way. Are you so eager to die?”

“Like hell I am! Haahh!!”

Demioros nimbly evaded her strike, slipping past her to rush Berard.

“Shit!” she cursed.

“?!”

“Watch closely, adventurer, and don’t you dare interfere! Let this be a lesson in how little you can protect with such paltry strength!”

Demioros’s fist collided with Berard’s gut, sending him flying into the air.

“Berard!” she cried.

“It’s not him that you should be worried about,” he continued with a smirk before disappearing in a blur of movement.

She raised her axe to block him, and while its shaft didn’t snap like Blut’s sword had, the sheer force of it sent her flying back across the arena. A few seconds later, Berard slammed into the ground with the force of a comet.

Demioros began to slowly approach him. “Now, unless I’m mistaken, you mentioned having a history with me, yes? I don’t remember seeing that bear mask—but your real face may ring a bell.”

Berard could barely even breathe, let alone resist the man’s approach. Demioros reached for his bear mask and, in a single swift motion, ripped it clean off.

“What... Kekeke... HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! Brilliant! How utterly perfect!”

Berard glared up at him wordlessly.

“Yes, I see! I understand our ‘history’ now! Look, Angreia, he must’ve suffered every bit as much as... No, *more* than you did!”

Beneath his mask was a head without even a single hair. Every inch of skin was raw with burns that no doubt still stung.

“To think I’d run into a second life I’ve ruined on today of all days! I’ve never felt so alive! What a horrific sight and what a perfectly miserable end to your miraculous shot at revenge! Oh, what a way to die! This, child, is the difference between the chosen humans and the mere livestock! Cry for your fate! Weep for me! Or no... your throat was crushed such that you can’t utter so much as a word, wasn’t it? My apologies—but at least you’ll be saved from the misery of pleading for your life!”

“Stop that this instant!”

“Hm?”

Demioros followed the speaker’s voice to find Beatrice standing at the arena’s edge.

“Please don’t lay so much as a finger on my students!”

“No.”

“What?!”

“You must be confused about how this works. You have no right to object and no power to change any of this. You can only consent to the game and despair as you die your desperate, grisly deaths, one by one. In fact, why don’t I give you one such demise? It’ll be simple—I’ll hack you apart, starting from one of your fingertips, and dislocate every joint you have while I’m at it. Simple, isn’t it? And rest assured, I’m adept at recovery magic. Whenever you’re on the brink of death, I’ll be sure to heal you.”

He was giving off such raw malice that she could hardly stand.

“Beatrice-neesan...” Agnos muttered weakly. “You gotta run...”

Demioros frowned at him. “Who said losers could talk?”

With that, he was suddenly in front of Agnos again, and he brought his foot down hard on the student’s skull.

“Agh?!”

Then, turning back to Beatrice, he slowly began to walk toward her.

“A-Ah...”

Her legs finally gave out, and she could only stare at him in terror.

“Now, show me the depths of your despair!”

“N-No...!”

His hand slowly reached out for her—

“Holy *shit*! What happened here?!”

Seiichi, having just returned from the infirmary, looked around the arena with eyes the size of saucers.

In that moment, despair had found its new target.

Chapter 13: Despair

Upon returning from the nurse's office, the training grounds had drastically changed. I hurried into the arena to find a man in a lab coat standing there with a bunch of people lying or kneeling all around him.

Wait... That's Agnos! I know those people!

"Holy *shit*! What happened here?!"

The closer I got, the less sense everything made. The worst of it was that not one, but two people had nasty-looking burns on their faces.

"Whoa, how'd you get those burns?! Are you okay?!"

Without even stopping to think about it, I cast Saint's Restoration, an Ultimate Light spell, on them. Apparently, it could heal any illness or injury except death in an instant. I didn't know the exact effect, of course, since nobody had cast it for generations. It was kind of a legend now, especially since most healing magic these days tended to leave older conditions alone.

Both burned people were bathed in light, and a second later, they were perfectly healthy again. They looked at me blankly, clearly not understanding what had happened to them.

"Wait, you're all hurt?!" I turned to the guy in the lab coat. "Hey, you, over there! You're the school nurse, right? Why aren't you helping these poor people?!"

His eyes narrowed at me. "Do I look like a doctor, of all things?"

"Well, yeah. Why else would you be wearing a coat like that? Unless it's a cosplay thing... Wait, do you have cosplay in this world? Whatever, that doesn't matter. You're here because you heard people getting hurt, right? No wonder I didn't see you back in the infirmary."

For a long moment, nobody said anything.

Am I wrong or something?

The guy in the lab coat seemed deeply confused, still not moving.

So, he's not gonna help me? Y'know, do his actual job? I guess I'll do it alone—and to be honest that'd probably be quicker.

I wound up casting healing magic on everyone who looked like they needed help. It was only after I'd finished that I realized the lady who'd had the burns wasn't able to move, and Barney-san was wrapped up in some weird rings of light.

"Uh... Barney-san? Having a kink or two is fine, but I'm not sure everyone wants to play along right now."

"Wh-What?! No! This is all that man's work!"

"Huh?"

I turned to find the lab coat guy glaring at me disdainfully.

"Oh, jeez, this is awkward." I scratched my head bashfully. "I'm not really into bondage—or guys, actually..."

"How are you *still* getting the wrong idea?!" Barney-san shouted at me from behind.

I cocked my head to the side in confusion.

The wrong... What?

"Seiichi-kun, that man is *dangerous*! Those rings of light are—"

"Too late," the mystery man said with a sadistic grin.

Bands of light sprung up from the ground at my feet, wrapping themselves around my body.

"Huh?" I looked dumbly down at them.

"That's Ultimate Light Magic, Brilliant Binding," he explained. "Anyone bound by them is rendered unable to use magic. You're in the same boat as the Great Sage now!"

Barney-san looked at me, hopeless terror written across his face. "No!"

Still, I didn't really get what the big deal was.

"So, this stuff is supposed to tie me up, right?"

"Hm?" The guy in the lab coat blinked at me in confusion.

Sure, the light was wrapped around me, but it clearly wasn't that tight. I could barely even feel it, and I was pretty sure I could use magic just fine if I wanted to.

"Really, who are you? Why would you just cast a spell like that at me?"

I gave him a hard look, and at that moment, the rings of light suddenly left me to go and bind him.

He recoiled in confusion. "What in the world...?"

"Oops."

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?!"

The rings clamped down around him, enveloping him so tightly that I could hear his bones creaking from way over where I was standing.

Uh... Okay? Seriously, what's going on here?

Apparently, my new Manipulator of Magics title was kicking in again. Then, I heard the voice.

"Master! Should I strangle this pathetic excuse for a mortal to death?"

"Huh?"

The rings were looking at me, for lack of a better term, though I could easily be imagining it. The voice, however, was impossible to ignore.

"How are you even talking? Why am I talking back to you?!"

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!! WH-WHYYYYYYYYYY?!"

"Huh, you're right!" the voice cheerily replied. *"I wonder how that works?"*

"D-DAMN YOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUU! GET OFF MEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

"Wait a sec... Is this my Universal Language Comprehension kicking in or something?"

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!! WHAT THE HEEEEEEEEEEELL?!”

“Oh, be quiet, you! Master needs time to ponder. Be quiet and wait your turn!”

“Gh... GHK?!”

I couldn't hear Cliff-sensei's magic talking during our battle. It could be because I knew about my new title now, and that made it so the Universal Language Comprehension Skill could work. It was then that I finally realized what the spell was doing.

“Ghhhkkkk... HNNNNNNGH!!”

The lab coat guy was forcibly prying the rings off with his bare hands, snapping them one by one and sending them flying like rubber bands.

“Th-This irreverent...!” Somehow, the magic seemed shaken. *“How is he so strong?! I'm so sorry, Master, I can't hold him!”*

“Gah!” he shouted, finally snapping the last ring and gasping for fresh air. “Y-You meddling milquetoast... I'll kill you!”

“You'll what?”

In the blink of an eye, he was right in front of me.

“Since you were able to wrest control of my spell from me, you're clearly skilled with magic, if nothing else.”

I didn't even cast anything, though.

“How dare you interfere with my carefully laid plan?” he hissed. “I'll beat despair into you with my own two hands!”

With that, he bolted off again, circling around behind me.

“You can't fight what you can't catch!” he sneered.

I didn't understand what he was saying. It looked like he just ran behind me like normal.

Does he think he's super fast or something?

I turned around, but just as I did so, he threw a punch at my gut. My eyes nearly popped out of my head. Finally, I realized that he might be a bad guy.

God, took me long enough! I should've known Barney-san was trying to warn me! I should really be more careful! Man, this is awkward.

Finally, his fist hit me, and at that moment—

“... Huh?”

He looked down to discover that his entire arm was gone.

“Huh? Wait... How? Wh-Where'd my arm go?”

It had completely disappeared, as if cut off cleanly at the shoulder. The wound even looked cauterized as if from intense heat, and there wasn't so much as a single drop of blood.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!! MY AAAAAAAAAAAARM!!”

“S-Sorry!”

Wait, why am I apologizing? I literally didn't do a thing!

“Y-YOU! What did you do to my arm?!”

“Uh... Nothing? I stood still?”

“STOP LYIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!!”

“I-It's the truth, honest!”

He was flailing around madly now, all signs of serenity gone.

Come to think of it, my Defense is so high it can't even fit on my Status screen anymore. Of course, it'd end badly for anyone attacking me, especially if they used their bare hands.

The one-armed lab coat guy glared at me; his bloodshot eyes were livid with rage.

Damn, he's starting to creep me out a little!

“I'll never forget this slight, you miserable sack of flesh! How dare you harm a Servant, a living conduit of the Wicked One Himself?!”

“Wait, you're who?”

“DIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIEEEE!!”

“Wait, that’s not—!”

Too late. His other fist hit my face in a swift hook.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH?! MY OTHER AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARM!!”

Second course, same as the first.

This isn’t my fault, right? He’s the one who decided to attack me, and judging from what Barney-san said, he’s probably not a good guy.

Having lost both his arms and with a lot of momentum he couldn’t easily deal with, he flopped awkwardly onto the ground.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!! I CANNOT BELIEVE THIS!!”

“Uh... Sorry, I guess.”

“Don’t you DARE apologize to meeeeeeee!!”

He began kicking and flailing about, like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but he either forgot or didn’t care that I was still beside him. Just like that, both of his legs were gone, too.

“GAAA.

“Seriously, what are you even trying to do?!”

What is he, six years old?!

Despite having lost all his limbs, he was still floundering about like a fish out of water. I still didn’t know what I had done to him, but I was starting to feel bad for the guy. I decided to give him his body back with Saint’s Restoration.

“You miserable...! You dare show ME mercy?!”

“Uh... Yeah.”

I guessed that was what I was doing. After he lost his arms, I just started to feel sorry for the guy. His eyes were fixed squarely on the ground in front of him, and he nodded to himself a few times.

“You... showed me mercy? You took pity on me? I’ve received His Malevolence’s blessing and overcome humanity in every respect... You showed

mercy on *me*, a Servant?!”

Jeez, this guy’s creepy.

I took a few steps back, just in case. At that point, Al wandered over to me, slumping against her axe.

“Thanks, Seiichi. You really saved our asses.”

“No, it was nothing... Wait, are you okay? You look really tired.”

“I’ll explain later. For now, we gotta deal with that freak. He came outta nowhere and really did a number on all of us.”

“Wait, you mean he hurt you, too?”

“Hate to admit it, but... yeah. I managed to block him, though, and thanks to your healin’, I’m right as rain!”

She flexed, as if to prove how healthy she was feeling now.

I didn’t reply; I just turned to the lab coat guy.

“Hey.”

“Hm?” He looked up at me from where he was hunched down, and I could feel his anger washing over me in waves. Slowly, he stood to his feet, swaying slightly as he felt for his balance. “Don’t get too full of yourself, mortal. You were lucky, nothing more. Yes, *lucky*. I—No, *a Servant* could never lose to a mere human like you!”

“...”

“I’ll make you regret healing me with every fiber of your miserable being. You’ll soon know despair greater than your worst nightmare!”

He broke into a run toward me.

“Shit!” I heard Al mutter a curse. “The hell’d he go?!”

I silently balled my fist.

Upon recognizing I wasn’t going to move, a manic grin split across his face.

“Hahahaha! Begone, human wretch! I’ll take my time drowning you in despair before I slaughter you like a pig! Every miserable soul here will taste true agony!

Keke, AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

I slugged him with every bit of strength I could muster, and his laughter cut off wetly.

To put things simply, he lost everything. First were his clothes—not even his underwear was spared. Then, every last follicle of hair was cleanly ripped out of his skin. Then his teeth—every last one. I hoped he had swallowed them. The shape of his face was permanently altered, with his nose splintering against his skull to make a piggy snout. His body lost all kinds of fluid, his intestines instantly dumping out his ass and streaking all the way across the arena. Any form of pride he once had was lost, as I was sure everyone in the stands saw the punch, leaving him sitting buck naked in a pool of his own waste.

“Nononononono... How is this possible?! How? How?! How can I win? How do I win? My odds? No, no, no, no chance, none, no... There’s no way I could possibly win, never, ever, ever... Stop it, stopstopstopstopstop! My arms... M-my poor legs! M-My body is... No! Not the hand! Don’t hurt me! Don’t—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!”

The lab coat guy—or actually, the naked guy now—began muttering to himself, his eyes plastered wide open. One second he was grinning like a madman, and the next he was shaking and convulsing in fear.

Jeez, that’s creepy. I didn’t totally break him, did I? And is it just me, or is everyone losing their clothes and wetting themselves today? It’s one of those days, I guess... Yeah, sounds about right!

I rolled my shoulders. “Ah, that’s a load off!”

Al looked at me in horror. “The hell’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, right. I guess *he* took a load off, literally, huh?”

“That ain’t what I meant!”

I still didn’t get what she was talking about. I was still thinking about how the one time I actually hit someone at full power—it destroyed them on a psychological level.

That's bad, right? I can't say what's so bad about it exactly, but I get the feeling it's, like... really bad.

I was miserable at describing it, but as soon as I struck out at the guy, I heard some kind of stressed creaking sound. It wasn't from me or even the naked guy—it was as if the world itself groaned under the weight of my punch. The sound honestly shook me up quite a bit, and I hurriedly pulled back until the world stopped screaming at me. After making sure I wasn't using too much force, I followed through with the rest of the punch, but that initial impact alone had sent him flying. In fact, he was going so high and fast that he was going to soar right out of the arena, so I used the Tempest Lord's Wall, an Ultimate Air spell, to stop him from going too far.

I'm pretty impressed I pulled that spell off so well, especially since I've never used it before. Nice job, me!

It was worth noting that all the clothes, hair, and teeth he lost were due to the force of my punch, not any spell I cast at him, but that didn't matter now. I had a more pressing question.

I turned to face Al. "So, what was all the commotion about?"

"You're kidding!"

For some reason, she seemed downright baffled.

Chapter 14: Seiichi Dies?

After I got angry about the lab coat guy hitting Ai, I lost my cool, and despite not really hitting him at full power, I'd broken his mind to the point where his rare episodes of sanity ended with him passing out and repeating the maddening process all over again. Interestingly, his hair kept growing back only to fall out again, and his mouth was already full of stubby new teeth. I wasn't convinced he was human anymore, but I couldn't exactly point fingers.

Turning around, I noticed for the first time that Beatrice-san was slumped on the ground. I held out my hand and helped her stand.

"Are you okay, Beatrice-san?"

"Huh? Are you... Seiichi-san...?"

She must've been unconscious for most of my "fight" against the creep.

"Yep, it's me," I replied with a nod.

"But that can't... Where did he go?"

"You mean the guy who attacked me? He's lying down over there, but you probably shouldn't look. He's pretty gross."

"What happened?"

I didn't answer. It wasn't something I wanted to explain, and I continued avoiding the topic as I tried desperately to block her view of the naked guy. Before long, though, Saria and the other girls rushed over to us.

"Are you okay, Seiichi?!"

"You lived!" Origa-chan smiled up at me.

"You are truly remarkable, Master."

After Saria had checked me out and confirmed that I wasn't hurt, she let out a sigh of relief. Lulune just nodded at me, respect in her eyes.

“I was so worried!” Saria said. “That man felt all wrong. I was so scared!”

Lulune nodded. “Regrettably, I felt much the same. I could not bring myself to challenge him.”

“What?!”

Their words were a shock. They were probably the strongest people there, except for me. I had no idea how strong Lulune was or where her strength came from, but Saria was well above the human level cap of 500. I was convinced they couldn’t lose to anyone.

I turned around to find the naked guy—now face-first in the dirt, his butt sticking high in the air.

Okay, I’m really confused now. He looks like a joke, not a threat.

Helen and the others then walked up to me.

“That was as ridiculous as always, Sensei,” Helen told me flatly.

“It wasn’t that bad, right?” I asked uncertainly.

“Oh, it was,” Irene assured me. “Why, he’s so hideous that I can hardly look at him now.”

“You sure that’s not just your opinion?”

“Maybe you should try to be more normal?” Rachel said, forcing a smile.

“Uh, wow... You too?”

I knew it was bad if even she was acting uncomfortable.

“It was just kinda ridiculous, y’know?” Flora added. “But I’m glad I’ve got someone like you as a teacher. Now can you tell me how to get up close and personal with girls like Saria-chan?”

“How should I know?! I mean, where did that even come from?! Aren’t you supposed to want to learn stuff like how to get stronger?”

“No,” she replied flatly.

“At least pretend to want to study!”

I mean, seriously, isn't it your job to study?! I'm not here to give out dating tips, and I couldn't if I wanted to!

I turned to Al. “Well, whatever. So, what really happened here?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Those Cult of the Wicked One creeps showed up outta nowhere, took Barnabus-sama hostage, and said they wanted to play a ‘game.’”

“A game?”

“Yeah. Beat him, and we all get to walk out alive. I challenged him—even Agnos and the others did—but he was way too powerful for us. We got wiped, hard. Oh, and you know that chick in the dress? She was with him, but he betrayed her and started sayin’ all sorts of creepy stuff.”

“Like what?”

“You saw her burns when you came in, right? Facial burns are rough for a girl, ‘specially a noble.’ Course, there are plenty of adventurers out there with facial scars... But anyhow, he went on about how he was the one who burned her, and he dug up all kinds of trauma for her.”

I didn’t know what to say. She went on to explain what exactly he’d said, and after she finished, I’d made up my mind.

“Lemme go punch that creep again.”

As I approached him, I roared, “Don’t even *joke* about that shit!”

I was pissed. I felt just as angry when I heard Al got hurt, and when Saria and the others had to literally hold me back in the cafeteria a while back. Still, I didn’t regret hitting him like I did. I only held back at the end because I was seriously worried about what would happen to the world if I kept going like that.

Actually, I’ve got a beef with the world about that. How’s the fabric of reality so weak that one little punch could tear it up?! How the hell am I even that strong?!

Thinking back, the things that creep said to me during our fight were pretty disturbing. He kept on talking about despair this and despair that. He seemed

obsessed, to be honest.

There's nothing in me but hope, though! E-Even if my body is...

is... I-I'm not crying, okay?!

"I don't think we need to worry," Al said with a glance back at him. "Your magic's already saved everyone else who needs saving, after all."

Looking around, I saw that she was right. Nobody seemed hurt at all, thanks to my quick response with my healing magic. The only exception was Cliff-sensei, who'd apparently gotten wrapped up in my punch and looked even worse off than before, but he was still alive... probably.

"What about Kannazuki-senpai and the others?" I asked, looking up at the stands. "Are they okay?"

I found Kannazuki-senpai startlingly quick, and she was already staring at me. Our eyes met.

Huh. That's one hell of a coincidence... right?

She seemed perfectly fine, but the other Heroes around her weren't quite so lucky. Some looked deathly pale, and others had fainted outright. Some of them were even glaring at me with pure hatred.

This might sound weird, but... they're Heroes, right? Didn't it occur to any of them to step in and do something? Especially after all the showboating they did earlier... Not that I'd let Kannazuki-senpai or any of my other friends risk themselves against a guy like that.

I gotta wonder why some of them seem to hate me, though. What, are they upset I stole the spotlight or something? That's a petty thing to get worked up over.

Either way, it still wasn't clear how strong the Heroes really were. It didn't seem like they could take on the Demon King in their current state—but again, I'd bail out my old friends if I had to.

"Oh, right! I'd better get Barney-san and that lady unbound."

Barney-san nodded at me. "P-Please, by all means."

Two castings of Abraham Lincoln later, and they were both free.

Damn, Mr. President, you're really putting in the work. I didn't think I'd ever have to rely on you again.

When I cast it on the lady, though, I noticed the black metal collar around her neck also broke and fell off. I recognized what it was just as it came off.

Al shot me a worried look. "Are you sure about that, Seiichi?"

I was convinced it'd be fine, though. She might've been with the creepy lab coat guy, but she'd been severely betrayed, and she seemed more interested in feeling her face than attacking us.

"M-My face," she muttered, feeling for the burn marks that were no longer there. "I'm... back to normal? How is the Collar...?"

"Oh, uh, I just figured I'd heal it along with your wounds."

From the looks of it, she'd been carrying that scar with her for a long time, in more ways than one. That also confirmed she'd been wearing a Collar of Subordination, just like Origa-chan.

Seriously, was that creep trying to do every evil thing in the book?

I felt someone looking at me, and I turned to see the male student whose whole head was covered in burn scars when I got there. He was staring strangely, his mouth flapping open and shut.

"Gh... Ah..."

He was touching his throat, and it sounded like he was testing his voice for some reason.

Who is that guy, anyway? He reminds me of Berard, but I don't see that bear head anywhere.

His burns were serious before, but he'd already grown out a head of short brown hair, and he had eyes of the same color. There was something regal about his features.

His hair's growing like crazy. I guess if I ever return to Earth, I can make a killing in the hair tonic market.

It wasn't long before Blud and Agnos wandered over to me, looking just as exhausted as Al had.

"S-Seiichi-sensei," Blud started.

"Agnos, Blud. You guys okay?"

"We're no worse for wear, but—"

"Aniki!" Agnos blurted. "What'd you do to Berard?!"

"Berard? Wait, that kid over there really is him?!"

"Damn, you didn't know when you healed him?!"

"Not really," I admitted. "You don't think he's upset or anything, do you?"

"You kidding?!" Agnos's eyes flew open.

"I don't think he was expecting this," Blud admitted, "but he seems well. Rather, I'm impressed you were able to heal him so quickly in the first place, reason or no."

Healing those painful-looking scars was enough of a reason on its own, but I was glad I didn't overstep my bounds. He might've been leaving the scars for a reason, like as a reminder, and I would've felt awful if he wanted to keep them.

"I still can't believe all this happened while I was in the infirmary with Leon," I muttered to myself.

Barney-san nodded solemnly. "None of us were expecting such an attack. We'll be increasing Academy's security while we investigate the attackers' motives. I hate to ask, Seiichi-kun, but could you watch the pair for the time being? I'd best put my students at ease."

"Of course. No problem."

With that, he left to see to the kids. I stood and watched him for a while until Al turned to me.

"By the way, Seiichi... You came in from outside, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"What entrance did you use?"

“I mean... the normal path in?”

Her expression hardened somewhat. “And you’re okay, right? You don’t feel strange or anythin’?”

“No. Should I be worried about something?”

At that moment, the naked guy’s eyes lit up. I could practically see the realization dawn on him as a wicked grin spread across his face.

“You did? You really did... ahahaha, HAHAAHAHAHA! It looks like I’ll have the last laugh after all!”

“Huh?”

I met his eyes as he stood, rage warping his face.

“I am a lofty Servant of the Wicked One, crowned with the name of Hellbringer! For your heinous sins against His Malevolence, you’ll die where you stand!”

As he finished, a strange magic circle lit up beneath me.

“Whoa?!”

More surprising, though, was that the whole world around me seemed to freeze in time. Everyone, from Al’s look of surprise to the man’s crazed smile, was frozen and no longer moved.

“The hell’s going on?!”

“Master, please compose yourself,” came a voice in my head.

“Huh?” I looked around to realize the magic circle at my feet was talking to me. “You’re a spell, right? I’m talking to magic?”

“That is correct, Master. I wanted to address you as soon as I was cast upon you, but I’m afraid I was dormant and unable to speak until that man channeled his mana into me.”

“Okay. So why are you talking to me?”

“First, I must note that the world around you has frozen on account of my element.”

“So, what kind of spell are you?”

“I am Teleportation Magic. I have dominion over space, and as such, I was able to freeze the space we’re in so that we could talk!”

It clearly seemed proud of itself. It was expressive for a spell.

“Okay. So can you stop me from going anywhere?”

“I would love to do just that,” it replied in a serious tone, “but my instincts as a magic circle are telling me that you must go to my destination.”

“Your destination...? And wait, what instincts?!”

I had no idea where it was trying to send me yet. I hadn’t been to many places in this world yet—mainly just the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, Terbelle, Barbodel Magic Academy, and a few tiny villages between the latter two. I didn’t know where I “had” to go, then, but I was pretty sure that this naked lunatic wouldn’t be sending me anywhere I’d already been.

“I am unable to tell you the exact destination,” it confessed, “but I have a knack for determining the affinity between my transportee and the intended point of arrival. Admittedly, you’re the only one capable of hearing me, so this talent of mine has gone largely unnoticed until now.”

That wasn’t surprising, but how could the spell “know” anything, especially something as abstract as all that?

“Your affinity with your intended point of transfer is unusually positive. You simply must go, for your own good! That would imply that man chose an ideal location!”

“Okay, but you still don’t know where it is?”

“No. Not a clue.”

“God, why?!”

I still didn’t understand the whole affinity bit, but I was more caught up on not even knowing where I’d get shipped off to.

“You see, Master, I would like to send you there for your own good. I wish for nothing more than your happiness, after all.”

“But I’d still like to know where I’m getting sent, y’know? Besides, if I just leave now, who’s going to keep that creep in check?”

“Not to worry. That man made the questionable decision of dumping the entirety of his mana into me—and don’t forget that I’m rather adept at spatial manipulation. I took the liberty of shifting the source of his power, his blessing from his so-called Wicked One, into an alternate dimension. Not only that, his physical state is beyond mention. I can assure you that he has no means of resisting your allies once you’ve left.”

“Holy shit?!”

I didn’t even know it was possible to move something like a blessing away like that. Did that mean the spell teleported part of the guy’s Status away? I didn’t know it could work like that—actually, I was morbidly curious about what’d happen if I just... teleported the problematic chunks of my own Status away.

“I just had a marvelous idea!” The spell sounded giddy with joy. *“Why don’t I transfer all that man’s power into you?”*

“NOOO!!”

I didn’t want or need more strength at all! Unfortunately, the spell didn’t even seem to notice my cry for mercy.

“How do you like that, Master? Oh, and don’t worry—I properly sent all the nasty bits into an interdimensional gap.”

It seemed eager to receive my praise, and even though I wasn’t happy about what it did, I wasn’t about to get angry at it either. It was just another part of my stupid, overpowered body I’d have to come to terms with.

I sighed. “Are you absolutely positive I’m okay to go? There won’t be any problems at the Academy if I do?”

“Again, I can’t be certain what awaits you on the other end of your teleportation, but please believe I have nothing but your happiness in mind. You may feel free to disregard everything else I said if it suits you.”

“Okay... I get it.” I smiled faintly at it. “I’ll take a look at where you want to send me.”

“Really? You mean it?!”

“Yeah. If Saria and the others are gonna be fine, I’ve got nothing to worry about—though I kinda wish I knew the Heroes’ next move.”

“Leave it to me! In fact, I’ll use the extra mana I stole from that man to cast a protective charm over your wives for good measure!”

The teleportation circle was really putting in some work, but the whole “wives” thing was a little too weird for me to wrap my head around.

“If you say so. I trust you.”

“Thank you! Thank you so very much!”

It started crying great tears of joy, and around me, I could see Al and the naked guy start moving again.

“AHAHAHAHAHA! DIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIE!!” He was literally foaming at the mouth, his eyes bloodshot.

The magic circle at my feet began to glow more brightly.

Finally able to move again, Al lunged toward me.

“Seiichiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!”

“Sorry, Al, be back soon! Oh, and kids—good luck on your exams!”

“What kinda last words are those?!”

Despite her cry, Al’s hand met nothing but empty air as I disappeared.



※ ※ ※

“Kekeke... BWAHAHAHAHAHA! Now that my only obstacle is gone, you’re all DEAD! Who wants to savor the humiliation of defeat first? Don’t think I’ll make your deaths qui—”

“WHERE THE HELL DID SEIICHI GO?!”

I, Altiria Grem, shouted as I punched that jackass Demioros as hard as I could, sending him sprawling. I hadn’t been able to even scratch him before, but this time, my fist connected with a solid crunch.

He looked up at me in shock. “Huh? What? Why?! How did a wretched maggot like you—”

“Brilliant Binding!” Before he could even finish his sentence, Barnabus-sama stepped up and bound him tightly in the same rings of light he’d used before. “I won’t let you have your way with my Academy again.”

“You fool!” Demioros spat. “You think such a weak spell can hold me?! Watch as I... Hngh? GAAAAAAAHAH!”

He struggled and screamed against the rings of light until he went bright red with effort, but the spell didn’t even budge.

“Why?!” he screeched again. “What happened to my strength? And why don’t I have any mana left?!”

“Don’t know, don’t care. I’m the one asking the questions now.” I strode menacingly toward him. “Where did you send Seiichi?”

That creep just grinned. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m Hellbringer. I sent him straight to Hell.”

“What?!”

“I’ve been there before, you know. Understand now? *I can teleport people straight to the Underworld!*”

“The hell?!”

He grinned madly. “Yes! That man is *dead!*”

I could do nothing but stare at him in horror.

Chapter 15: The Underworld

After banking everything on the teleportation circle the naked creep had cast, I found myself somewhere I didn't expect.

"Where the hell am I?!"

The grass at my feet was obsidian black, and the sky was an unsettling shade of blood red. I had no idea where in the world I could've been.

"How the hell is coming *here* supposed to make me happy?! This whole damn place is nothing but bad vibes!"

I found myself screaming into the open air, just like I had when I first got sent to the Forest of Endless Heartbreak. This time, however, I heard someone reply.

"This is the Underworld," boomed the voice. "The Realm of the Dead, where all souls end..."

"Oh, okay, so I'm in the Underworld. Wait, the Underworld?! And who are you?!"

Something about the speaker was unsettling, and I couldn't figure out who was speaking or where from.

"I am the Underworld, this sullen world given voice."

"Shit, really?!"

I never thought I'd be talking with the world itself. That wasn't my biggest concern, however.

"I'm in the Underworld? Seriously?!"

"Yes. You are dead."

"Wow."

For a long moment, I couldn't figure out what the voice meant.

Can I get that again in Japanese, please?

My confusion quickly gave way to a different emotion.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

You’ve gotta be kidding me! I’m dead?! Are you fucking kidding me?!

“Cut the bullshit! I can’t be dead! I demand compensation!”

“This is the Underworld... You have no legal rights here...”

“Can’t I have rights in just one goddamn world?!”

Am I a “Human” or not? Why does nobody seem to treat me like, I dunno, a human?

The Underworld paused for a moment, as if in thought. “That is only the result, however... You are not truly dead.”

“Uh... Come again?”

“You have not died.”

“YEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

Jeez, I was really worried for a minute there!

“But,” the somber voice continued, “you are, in effect, dead.”

“Which is it?!”

I was just teleported there, after all. I didn’t remember getting stabbed or my organs stopping or anything, but I guess I could’ve died in a way I didn’t remember.

“Let me repeat myself... This is the Underworld... Land of the Dead... This world exists for those who have died alone... There can be no exceptions, no adjustments.”

“Oh!”

Finally, it all clicked. Only dead people could come to this world, so by being there, I was effectively dead.

“Damn... I guess I’m really dead, huh?”

That was a depressing thought. I wasn’t ready to die, especially since I hadn’t even said a proper goodbye to Saria or anyone else.

Maybe I shouldn't have trusted that magic circle after all. This is the end.

At that moment, though, a familiar voice echoed through my brain.

>Skill: Evolution has activated. Adapting your body to the Underworld...

"Oh." The Underworld sounded vaguely surprised. "You just adjusted to the Underworld."

"No exceptions, my ass!"

"I don't understand how, but you can survive here now... You are dead... And yet, you are different from the others... What a mystery..."

Apparently, my body was so screwed up that it was even throwing the Underworld for a loop.

Again—I'm human! H-U-M-A-N! And no, I'm not sure I believe that myself!

With that, I finally felt more at ease. "Well, whatever. Being alive is nice and all, but how do I get outta this place?"

"The Underworld is distinct from the Human World... Teleportation magic cannot cross the boundary between worlds..."

"Oh."

I'd never thought about it since it didn't seem relevant, but all my spells only worked on the same world. That was why I couldn't just teleport back to Earth as soon as I picked up my Teleportation Magic.

Wait... I've got a bad feeling about this.

I reached for the Necklace of Endless Love and tried to use the telepathy function.

"Hey, Saria! Al! Lulune! Can you hear me?!"

Sure enough, there was no reply.

Seriously? So, I can't even contact the others, let alone go back?

Before the depression could really set in, though, a thought occurred to me.

"Wait. I got here by teleportation magic, didn't I?"

“It is possible to bridge the gap between worlds under certain conditions... Coming here is easy enough... Anyone can die... But no lost soul can return to life... Returning to the Human World from here is impossible with teleportation...”

Wait, so am I dead or not?

“Hold on,” I said. “The guy who sent me here had to have been to the Underworld before to send me here, right? Er, wait... So, he was dead all along?!” I shivered.

“Impossible... Though it would still be possible to teleport people here through specific means...”

“Like what?”

“Yes... Teleportation magic requires the user to touch the ground at the intended destination... But at the door between the worlds, the entrance to the Underworld, a specific artifact may be used instead of one’s body to teleport there...”

“Huh. Sounds pretty easy.”

“No... Such an artifact is the tool of higher-dimensional beings... A god’s power is needed to craft it...”

In other words, that naked guy got a tool from a god so he could literally ship people to the Underworld.

“So, you can’t teleport between worlds without a god’s help?”

“Precisely...”

In that case, it’d be a lot harder than I thought to get back to Earth. I didn’t want to go myself, of course, but I wanted to send Shouta and my other friends back if they wanted to. I had Saria and the others, and no real reason to go back to Earth.

There was something the Underworld mentioned that was still nagging at me, though.

“You mentioned there’s an ‘entrance’ to the Underworld, right? So, there’s like a visible boundary or something?”

“Yes...”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

That was not the answer I was expecting.

“The gateway to the Underworld lies at the western edge of the Human World...”

“So, what, dead people try to get back home through there?”

“That relates to my reason for addressing you...”

“Your what?”

Come to think of it, though, it did just start talking to me out of the blue.

“I have not mentioned it, but my consciousness will soon fade into nothingness...”

“Shit, that’s serious! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!”

“I wanted to answer your questions...”

“I’m so, so, so sorry!”

I immediately dropped to the ground, feeling super guilty.

It’s all my fault, isn’t it?! Sorry, Underworld!

“Do not apologize... But anyways... I talked to you in hope that you could vanquish the Phantoms that infest this world...”

This could be trouble.

“As you guessed, the Phantoms are flocking to the gateway, attempting to flee to the Human World. Normally, the door is open, and a guard maintains the passage, but the guard has been vanquished, and the door has been shut. Normally, when the door closes, human spirits are forced to stay among the living. They become zombies and all manner of other undead...”

“W-Well, crap.”

I didn’t know how to react to that kind of world-scale issue, and I still couldn’t see how this could possibly lead to my happiness, as the circle put it.

“I think I get what you’re saying, but why tell me?”

“Normal spirits have no body—they drift aimlessly throughout this world. But when Phantoms gain sentience, they form a body, and cannot be slain... This, alone, would warrant the closing of the gate. But now, the Phantoms have a king, and their wicked power continues to grow...”

Why does this sound like every classic RPG ever? Then again, I've been dealing with game logic ever since I got sent to this world...

“Only you possess a mind and body of your own. I must release my full power to birth a new guardian for the gateway... I will not disappear; rather, I will enter a deep slumber to restore my power. I require you to slay the king of the Phantoms and those under its command...”

“Great. Good to know you're not asking *too* much from me.”

“I regret this, truly... You need not slay the king if it proves impossible—I can handle that myself; even should my sense of self disappear, I will strike him down... But I beg of you... Please buy enough time for the guardian to be born. I shall compensate you well, of course... Succeed, and I shall return you to the Human World...”

It sure sounded like the Underworld was in trouble. It all felt so far-fetched that I was calm about it. Besides, it sounded like it was also my ticket home.

“All right, I'll help you. I don't know how useful I'll be, though.”

I was plenty strong in the Human World, sure, but this was the Underworld. I had no idea what passed as strong here. I could easily be powerless.

“Thank you...” said the Underworld, its voice brimming with emotion. “Thank you...”

With that, my mission to purge the Phantoms from the Underworld began.

Chapter 16: Reunion

I nodded in the general direction of the Underworld. “All right, I’ll help you however I can. So, where’s this king of the Phantoms guy?”

“My apologies... I have already begun to birth a new guardian, and my consciousness is fading...”

“You’re kidding!”

I haven’t even gotten any details yet! Where in the Underworld do I start?

“I’m sorry... So sorry... The rest is in your hands...”

“W-Wait, get back here!”

There was no reply, no matter how many times I called out to it.

“Jeez, talk about difficulty spikes. At this rate, I’ll get lost before I ever find that king thing.”

Come to think of it, I’m pretty much screwed, aren’t I?

“Dammit, I’m not following any of this shit...”

It was just like my first time in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak. Come to think of it, it was practically a miracle I survived that madhouse in the first place—especially with a Luck Stat of zero.

Just as I was feeling lost, though, the enemy detection function of my Clairvoyance Skill suddenly felt something.

I turned toward the feeling, only to find a strange creature there. Its body was pitch black, and its massive, lifeless eyes were fixed in my general direction. Its mouth was curved into a big smile, and I could see rows of pearly white teeth within.

“Eee...”

“Crap crap crap!”

Where the hell did that thing come from?!

It was oddly unsettling to look at, but what really shocked me was how suddenly it had appeared, as if out of thin air.

"Eee..."

"Seriously... What the hell are you? The way you're staring, I could swear you're trying to drill holes in—"

I didn't get to finish, however, as its eyes suddenly lit up and launched a pair of lasers at me.

"What the hell?!" I bent wildly out of the way, narrowly avoiding the beams. "Your gaze is literally trying to drill holes in me! Seriously, what are you?! And what's with that creepy-ass face?!"

"Eee..." It wordlessly fired another salvo of lasers.

"Enough with the eye beams already!"

It didn't even seem to hear me as it continued firing away at me, and I kept bending awkwardly to avoid it.

"What even are you?!"

I decided to hit it with Greater Analysis.

<PHANTOM> Level: ???

"You are a Phantom?!" I screamed at it.

What's with its level? I haven't seen anything like that since the U.M.A. in that Balzas guy's store in Terbelle! I wonder what happened to that thing?

Most importantly, though, it was probably able to appear out of nowhere and avoid my detection Skills because it was technically a ghost. If that was the case and the Phantom King had a similar ability, it'd be pretty much impossible to track it down.

I'm officially screwed, aren't I?

Nonetheless, I drew Black, the Rapier of Festering Hatred, and White, the Rapier of Burgeoning Love.

“If you’re a Phantom, then it’s my job to exterminate you.”

I didn’t know if it could even hear me, but I waited a few seconds just in case it could reply before leaping at it. I remembered the amount of force I’d used against the lab coat guy back at the Academy and tried to replicate it—strong, but not quite strong enough to tear the world in half. I even had my Endless Hell Skill, so I wasn’t too worried about potential side effects.

I wish I didn’t have to worry about destroying the world whenever I try to do anything...

I swung hard at it. The Phantom was clearly too slow to follow my movements—it was still staring blankly at the spot I’d been before. When I hit it, though, the unexpected happened.

“EeeEee?!”

Its body indented like it was made of black rubber, waves of force rippling across its surface. The impact sent it bending backward for a heartbeat, but then it suddenly turned, its front now facing me. I suddenly got a bad feeling about it and backed out of the way. No sooner than I’d backed out of the way—

THWANG!!

The Phantom snapped back into place, leaving a colossal groove in the ground where I’d just been standing.

“Y-You gotta be kidding...”

I broke into a cold sweat. The Phantom didn’t even seem to register that it’d been hit.

“That thing just reflected my attack back at me, didn’t it?”

Not only that, it was unharmed—but it wasn’t the creature that scared me. I was too busy wrapping my brain around an even greater terror.

*“How was my attack *that* strong?!”*

It seemed like something I should’ve been used to by that point—and yet having that ridiculous force aimed back at me totally changed my perspective on my power. I didn’t care that I couldn’t seem to hurt the thing—I was busy grappling with my own meteoric strength.

“Shit... I’ve gotta be a *lot* more careful throwing my weight around in the future...”

“Eee...”

Looking back at the Phantom, it seemed different somehow. It was clearly pleased I was terrified, but as it realized I wasn’t scared of it, the thing was getting more and more upset. It began spraying lasers randomly at me.

“Eee!”

“Wh-Whoa?! Calm down, will you?!”

It either didn’t hear me or didn’t care as it kept up its assault.

If physical attacks can’t scratch this thing, what about magic?

I cast some Basic Fire magic, Fire.

“Take this!”

I chunked the crackling sphere of flame at it, which was bigger than any Basic spell had a right to be. The Phantom stopped its attacks for a moment, taking the spell head-on and bouncing it right back at me.

“Crap... What now?”

How do you even fight something totally immune to physical and magical damage?

Oddly enough, though, I wasn’t too worried yet. That was when I picked up on some other things close to me, and hesitantly, I turned to face them.

“Oh, shit.”

“Eee...”

“Eee...”

“Eee...”

“Eee...”

There was a whole swarm of Phantoms right there in front of me.

Jeez, this is terrifying! I’m really bad with ghosts and horror movies! I wanna go home... not that I have a home to go to!

I stood there for a long moment, my smile frozen awkwardly on my face, before all the Phantoms started shooting at once.

“Eee...”

“Eee...”

“Eee...”

“Th-This isn’t funny anymore!”

I ducked as the barrage flew just over my head. That wasn’t the end of it, though—the lasers hit other Phantoms, deflecting back and making it impossible to stand back up.

I clamped my hands over my head, trying to make myself as small as possible. “I’m screwed, I’m so screwed! How the hell am I supposed to kill the Phantom King like this?!”

Forget the King, I can’t even handle these regular mobs!

“I hate this! Help! Help meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

“As you wish,” came a voice.

“Huh?!”

“Eee?!”

One of the Phantoms squealed in pain. I looked up to find that a sword remarkably like Black was sticking out of the creature’s chest—or at least, what I assumed was its chest. Its attacker withdrew the sword, and just like that, the creature faded into motes of light.

Standing there was a handsome young man I didn’t recognize. His mid-length platinum blonde hair was parted neatly down the middle. He looked at me with large, relaxed emerald eyes.

“It’s been a while, has it not, Seiichi-dono?”

“Whaaaa?!”

Wh-Who are you?! I don’t know any guys as handsome as you!

As he drew closer, I saw that he was wearing long black robes that were styled like mourning clothes, and he had a noble air around him. Something about the way he was dressed rang a bell, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

All around us, the Phantoms began to screech with rage.

"Eee!"

"Eee!"

"Eee!"

"Egh?!"

Before they could attack, though, black spears rained down on them, skewering and slaying several more.

"Mind if I join you?" came a young man's soft voice.

"I-I'm sorry," came a woman's voice, "I'm afraid I can't fight."

"Ahahaha, of course! I nearly forgot. You can wait there with our maid friend. But for my first fight in ages to be *this*, of all things... How irritating."

I looked up to see a guy with gentle features, black hair, and black eyes. Some distance behind him were a woman in an apron and a maid. The man was the first one to catch my attention, though. He had two large horns curling up from his forehead.

Is he a demonkin or something? And now that I'm paying attention, that apron lady has horns, too.

He wasn't as handsome as the nobleman, but he was just as well-dressed in elegant black clothes. A crimson cloak was draped loosely over his shoulders.

The demonkin opened his arms in a simple gesture. "Without further ado—farewell."

As he said so, countless more pitch-black spears formed above him for a moment before falling on the Phantoms like a rain of death. Despite not being able to even touch the things myself, the demonkin and the young man were having no trouble cutting through the horde, their numbers thinning with each

passing second. Watching the demonkin, there was only one thing that came to mind—the Demon King.

Then I heard a cacophony of voices, despite the battle being pretty much over anyway.

“Let’s rip these ghoulies a new one!”

“Roger!”

“Understood!”

“I’ll do what I can!”

Sure enough, a party of four was just joining the fray. One was a mountain of a man with thick armor, who blocked laser after laser with his massive shield. Another was wearing light, embroidered brown robes like what a traveler might wear, and he cut through the Phantoms that were busy throwing themselves at the big guy. Then there was a young girl in a hunter’s light armor with bright red hair, who pelted the creatures with a rain of arrows. The last was a young woman in pure white robes, who cast some support magic on the men on the front lines before firing magic into the mob.

I... I don’t get it. How are all their attacks hitting those things? And more importantly—

“Who are you guys?!” I screamed.

Seriously, what’s going on here?! They just came out of nowhere to bail me out. Wait... Maybe I’m not saved after all. They don’t wanna take my money or anything, do they?! I have enough money, sure, but that’s still unnerving!

Before I knew it, the Phantoms had all been defeated, and in that time I went from worrying about my life to worrying about my wallet. The blonde noble didn’t even seem to notice as he walked up to me.

“This is our first-time meeting like this, isn’t it?”

“U-Uh... Wait, who are you? Do you want my money? That’s what you’re after, right?!”

“Money?! Seiichi-dono, you must be mistaken!”

He seemed genuinely confused, but he still looked more handsome than I could describe.

Damn these pretty boys and their gorgeous antics!

At that, the maid who'd been waiting out of the line of fire came forward. "I don't believe he recognizes you, Zeanos-sama."

He nodded. "No... No, I suppose he doesn't."

Wait, Zeanos? I know that name, but there's no way it's him!

He turned to face me and bowed regally. "Allow me to re-introduce myself. I am the Duke of House Zeford, Zeanos. I haven't seen you since the Forest of Endless Heartbreak."

The man who I now knew was Zeanos gave me a soft smile.



I stared at him blankly for a few solid seconds. Then—
“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

This can't be real! Like, seriously?! THE Zeanos Zeford, the Dark Nobleman I fought in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak?! He was just a skeleton then! How is he so handsome now?! None of this makes sense!

I slowly turned towards the maid. I had a good idea of who she was already.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said with a curtsy. “I am Marie, Zeanos-sama’s humble servant.”

“MARIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIE!!”

I knew it! I knew it was her! It's his maid-slash-lover I read about!

As I picked my jaw off the ground, the party of four approached us.

“Looks like you met him,” the big guy said with a grin.

Zeanos nodded. “I have you to thank for your aid.”

“No need to thank us,” the smaller guy in the traveler’s robe said. “Now that we’re finally back to our old selves, we’re glad to aid you.” He then turned to me for some reason. “You must be Seiichi-kun.”

“Uh, yeah, but... how do you know that?”

“Zeanos—and two of our other acquaintances, of course—told us all about you.”

“Who?”

“We know all about you, Seiichi,” the big man said. “You’re the reason we woke up at all. Of course, we’d come find you!”

“Uh... Okay?”

I'm not following any of this. What's he trying to say?

The demonkin man noticed my confusion and smiled. “Just like the Phantoms that attacked you, we all used to be lost spirits that wandered this world without even remembering who we were. But when you came here, all of us awakened. You could say we’re bound together by fate.”

“Fate?”

In that case, meeting Zeanos made sense—I fought him, after all. I didn’t know any of the others.

“Let me start,” he continued. “My name is Lucius Alsare, the first Demon King. Does that ring a bell?”

Nope. Not at all. I mean, that’s one hell of a title! Assuming he isn’t lying, of course.

“Still don’t know me?” he pressed. “Back when the demonkin had no home to call their own, I left on a journey with the Black Dragon God and my other companions to create a country where we could live in peace. Most of them are probably long dead by now, but I hope the Black Dragon God is still doing well.”

Shit, he’s the real deal!

“I suppose we’re next,” the slender youth said. “I’m Abel—Abel Stadia. In life, I was a Hero.”

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!”

“I’m his buddy, Gars Rockert. I’m a warrior.”

“HUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUH?!”

“My name is Anna Reude, a hunter.”

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMM?!”

“And I am a sage by the name of Liliana Morst.”

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!”

I was planning on going ‘HOOOH?!’ next, but my head felt ready to burst as it was.

I know that Abel guy! Saria found his journal back in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak! What kind of “fate” could link me to a guy like him?!

Still in a daze, the aproned demonkin stepped forward next.

“My name is Naturliana Greendt. I’m not impressive or famous, though, so I have no idea what our ‘fate’ could be.”

“O-Okay...”

To be honest, I hadn’t ever heard of her before. I’d at least heard the names of Abel and his friends before, but I had no idea how we were at all connected. I didn’t have long to thinking about it, though, as Lucius-san smiled at me.

“Now that we’re all introduced, I have some people I’d like you to meet.”

“Uh... Okay?” I had no idea who he could be referring to, but there was something bugging me. “Are you sure you’re fine with Abel and the others being here? I mean, you have a history.”

The shock of meeting them all had taken me by surprise before, but now that I thought about it, he was a Demon King and Abel was a Hero. I was sure they’d be at each other’s throats already.

“No need to worry!” Lucius-san grinned. “I may have had a bit of a temper in the past, but after my fight with the Heroes of my day, I learned they were victims just like me.”

Abel nodded. “Likewise, after Pierre betrayed us, we had plenty of time to look into who the Demon Kings really were. I only wish we’d known better at the time...”

“Anyhow!” Lucius-san declared cheerily. “No more talk of gloomy pasts. I wouldn’t want to leave them waiting!”

“Sure. So, uh, who is it I’m meeting?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll know soon enough. We had them wait some distance away with a guard, you see, since we didn’t want them getting wrapped up in the fight. They’re even more vulnerable than Naturliana or Marie.”

“...?”

Still not quite understanding, I followed Zeanos and the others.

“I... waited so long.”

“What?!”

Standing there was the Treasure Chest, the same one I’d killed in the Black Dragon God’s dungeon.

“Wh-What are you doing here?!”

“We are linked... you defeated me.”

“You’re not holding a grudge about that, right?”

“No... All is forgiven. Come. They are waiting...”

“Seriously, what the hell is up with Hell?!”

Is fate really that indiscriminate? Do I just have to kill something for it to count? Are there Sandmen or Clever Monkeys waiting to meet me somewhere?!

For now, though, I held on to my questions. When I finally saw who they wanted me to meet, my mind went totally blank.

“We missed you, Seiichi.”

“How’ve you been?”

Standing there waiting for me was none other than my parents.

Chapter 17: Parents

“M-Mom? Dad...?”

I could barely bring myself to call out to them. Both of them were looking right at me—my dad, Makoto Hiiragi, with his usual calm smile, and my mom, Kazumi Hiiragi, who looked like she was on the verge of tears; she was so happy.

“Why? How are you...?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know either,” Dad replied. “Suddenly, we were just... here.”

“Zeanos-san and the others found us soon after,” Mom added. “After that...”

Mom went on to explain the details, but I couldn’t focus on a word she said. I was convinced that after I lost them in that accident, I’d never see them again. But here we were, together again.

“Y-You’re really here? You’re really Mom and Dad?”

Dad nodded. “Yep.”

“Of course, sweetie. I’m so sorry we left you alone. It must’ve been dreadful. You weren’t too miserable, were you?”

Mom hugged me tight, and Dad started stroking my hair soothingly. She felt soft, real. I could feel every familiar contour of Dad’s hand.

I was sure it was them, and for some reason, I couldn’t stop crying.

“D-Dad... Mom... Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

I had cut off Shouta and the other few friends I had when my parents died. Somehow, I’d come to the conclusion I had to handle my problems alone, and I was so close to giving up more times than I could count. Why did they have to die? I didn’t want to be alone. I was heartbroken that they were dead and furious that they hadn’t taken me with them, but above all, I was terrified to be

left all alone. None of that could compare to the sheer happiness I felt right then and there.

I could feel such a rush of emotions that I tried to put into words again and again, but every time I opened my mouth, only whimpers would come out. It didn't matter, though—I was overjoyed to feel their touch again. I could stand there and bawl my eyes out like a little kid. Mom patted me on the back reassuringly, and Dad kept on stroking my hair in that soothing way.

Zeanos and the others didn't make fun of my weakness. They just smiled and watched as I lost myself in happiness.

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"Sniff... Sorry, I don't know what got into me..."

I had no idea how long I was crying for, but eventually I managed to regain my composure. Now that I was thinking again, I realized that I must've changed a huge amount since the last time they had seen me, but they recognized me instantly. Even though my hood fell off in the fight with the Phantoms, I had to look like a totally different person now.

When I finally asked them about it, though, they seemed confused.

"What're you talking about? What kind of father wouldn't recognize his own son?"

"Of course! I knew it was you the moment I spotted you."

Dad nodded in agreement. "You're just bigger than we remember you. You're a real man now."

They exchanged glances and laughed. I didn't know what to say exactly, but they seemed much stronger than I could ever be.

I looked over them closely. "Also, uh, you look a lot younger than I remember."

They seemed to be in their thirties, as if they'd wound back the clock somehow. They still looked perfectly average, of course, with dark hair and eyes like pretty much everyone else.

Honestly, I still don't get how they had a pig of a kid like me...

"I know!" Mom exclaimed, eyes lighting up. "Isn't it amazing, Makoto-san? All it took to get younger was coming to this world!"

Dad nodded understandingly. "Yeah, I can see it. Wait, do you think we can sell this? Like a magic place you can go to become younger?"

"Yeah, right!"

What's he thinking?! He's gotta know this is literally the Underworld, right?! You gotta die to get here!

They had always gone off on weird tangents like this in the past. When I was a kid, I found it annoying; now, however, I was just glad to see them again.

I sighed. "How did you even get here? This is a whole different world's version of the Underworld, right?"

If they died on Earth, then obviously they should be in Earth's afterlife, not this one.

Lucius-san stepped forward to take this one. "You're right—each world has its own version of this place, and normally, they never mix. But you're on par with—no, even stronger than—a god in some ways, so when you came here, your bond with them must've yanked them straight into this afterlife. Since they're not from our Human World, though, they didn't know the first thing that's going on here, so we had to fill them in on that."

Just like that, we're talking mechanics of reality again. But what did he mean by "stronger than a god"?! I swear, my mind and body are playing two totally different games here!

"Oh, my! My little Seiichi's gotten so important!"

"That's my boy! I always told you to go big or go home, and you sure went big!"

There was no doubt in my mind that they weren't following the conversation at all.

I guess I have my body to thank for this, though. This never would've happened if I wasn't so brokenly strong.

Mom's expression turned a little more serious. "I must admit I was surprised when we arrived in this world, but it all makes sense now. We had always been watching over you on Earth, and we were both so shocked when your whole school vanished. I was beside myself with worry—I couldn't find you no matter how hard I looked—but I'd never considered you were in a different world altogether."

Dad nodded. "We know just how hard it's been for you ever since we left, but we're proud of you for persevering. It was so frustrating to see you in so much pain, knowing we couldn't help. For a while, I was determined to kill those brats who were picking on you somehow."

I could hear the sorrow and anger in his voice. Somehow, knowing that I'd been making them worry for so many years was worse than the bullying itself. At the same time, though, I was so happy to hear they'd been watching over me that I thought I'd start crying tears of joy.

"Don't worry," I reassured them. "I've been living my life facing forward, just like you taught me to."

I gave them the biggest smile I could, hoping to make them worry that much less.

Sensing that we'd finished talking, Zeanos stepped forward.

"Well, then. Shall we get down to business?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks for waiting."

"No need to thank me. You should treasure what you have with your family." He cleared his throat. "So, Seiichi-dono, I understand that you need to slay Phantoms—no, the Phantom King. We'll help you however we can, but as you are now, you can't even scratch the fiends."

"Yeah..."

Everything I tried just bounced off their rubbery black bodies. Zeanos and the others had no trouble defeating them, though.

"In that case," Abel said with a smile, "we'll do better than just help you. We'll teach you how to fight the Phantoms, too."

“You know how normal attacks don’t work, right?” Gars said. “Well, you’re missing the most important thing—Life Energy.”

“Life Energy...?”

Like the weird black light in that giant robot anime that starts with a G? Not sure I wanna get involved with that.

Abel nodded. “That’s correct. Phantoms are ghosts—they’re dead, so if you force Life Energy into them, they can’t maintain their form.”

“But aren’t you guys dead, too?” I asked.

Gars grinned. “Yep! Thanks to you, though, we’re as good as alive here. Besides, Heroes like us have enough Life Energy to blow those bastards apart even in death! Gahaha!”

Anna sighed. “That’s obviously not true. Seriously, you’re so dumb.”

Liliana chuckled at their exchange. “Regardless, it’s thanks to you and your influence on this world that we’re able to fight Phantoms at all. I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it!”

Zeanos nodded in agreement. “It’s surprisingly simple, actually.”

“Really?”

I was relieved to hear that.

“You’ll have a feel for it in no time,” he reassured me. “Besides, it’s our duty to teach you just that.”

I nodded slowly. “So, you’re saying you’ll train me?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“Great! When can we start? I’m in bit of a hurry to get back. Oh, but I have to get a ‘feel’ for my Life Energy or whatever first, right?”

Zeanos burst out laughing. “Hahahahaha! That’s an amusing thought. No, you’ll be learning how to use it in a real fight.”

“Uh... Come again?”

“Let’s go find some Phantoms. Oh, I’ll teach you how to detect them as well, so pay attention.”

“You’re kidding me!”

This isn’t what I had in mind at all! Sure, it’s the fastest way, but...

Dad nodded understandingly. “Kids. They grow up so fast...”

“Just so we’re clear, Dad, this isn’t a normal part of growing up, right? Please tell me it’s not!”

I can’t even tell what’s normal anymore!

With that, Zeanos and the others led me off for my trial by fire with Life Energy.

Chapter 18: Life Energy

“Let’s start by covering how to detect Phantoms, shall we?”

Zeanos got right into teaching me how to deal with Phantoms. The other combat-oriented members of our group were with us, while Mom, Dad, Marie-san, and Naturliana-san watched from a safe distance. The Treasure Chest was with them, of course, as their bodyguard.

“First,” Zeanos began, “there isn’t so much as a single living creature in the Underworld. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of, I guess.”

“From the ground beneath your feet to the trees and grasses, everything is as dead as everything else.”

“Huh?!”

Looking around, I admittedly couldn’t see any leaves on the trees or anything, but they looked alive enough to me.

“Everything in the world we came from is alive,” he continued. “Thus, Life Energy is present in all things there.”

“Makes sense.”

“The Underworld is devoid of Life Energy, however. Not even the trees have any.”

“I think that makes sense.”

“Now, this is the important part for our purposes: nothing has Life Energy, meaning everything is dead, and by extension, nothing has a ‘presence’ that you’re used to feeling.”

“Okay...”

I guess that makes sense. I can't exactly "feel" a dead body in another room, after all.

"Regular spirits have no Life Energy, either, but Phantoms are different. In effect, they run on *negative* Life Energy. They are filled not with the power to live, but the power to wither away life."

Lucius nodded. "That's why if something living touches a Phantom, it dies on the spot. I'd keep that in mind if I were you, Seiichi-kun!"

I shuddered. "Jeez, I had no idea when I was first fighting those things..."

"You're lucky you didn't die. What you don't know can and will kill you," Abel said with a crisp smile. "You'll have to be extra careful from now on."

Unfortunately, I wasn't like a certain red comet, and I couldn't laugh in the face of death so easily.

"More importantly," Gars said, "a Phantom's negative Life Energy means that if you're able to detect Life Energy, they'll stick out to you."

Anna nodded. "It's like... I dunno, when a chill runs down your spine?"

"Yes," Liliana echoed. "If you can feel your body physically recoiling, you'll know a Phantom is close."

"Not to imply we really know how that feels," Lucius-san added. "Our 'lives' are just borrowed from your Life Energy. That's why you're the only one with any chance of defeating the Phantom King."

"I guess that makes sense?" I replied hesitantly. "But do any of you know what that Phantom King or whatever is like?"

Lucius-san gave me a thin smile. "Sorry, I'm afraid we can't help you on that one. All we can say for sure is that it's bound to have some crazy negative energy."

"Okay..."

I wonder what it's like, though?

Just then, everyone else suddenly perked up.

"Speak of the devil," Zeanos muttered.

Lucius-san nodded. “That can only be one thing.”

“Phantoms,” Abel muttered.

Wait, already? I don't even know how to use Life Energy yet. Can't they wait until we're done?

Sure enough, one of the gross, blobby things appeared right in front of us.

“Eee...”

Gars narrowed his eyes at it. “I know you can see it, but try to concentrate on how it feels. If you can pull that off, then you'll have your own Life Energy at your disposal.”

“How it feels...”

I focused on the Phantom, trying to get a physical sense for it. I'd just relied on my Skills for stuff like that, so I didn't know if I had a feel for stuff like that. I tried to push the pessimism out of my thoughts, and as I did so, I could feel something weirdly cold behind me.

“Huh?!”

I whipped around, and sure enough, there was a second Phantom there.

“Good. It looks like you can feel them now.”

“Y-Yeah.”

I wasn't expecting to be able to do it at all, let alone so quickly. Not only that, now that I had a feel for the second Phantom, I could sense the one in front of me, too. The one behind me felt just like Anna said—like a chill down my spine. For the other, it was hard to describe, but it was a similar sensation, but towards the front.

“Get a handle on it here, and you'll be able to pick up on Life Energy in the world of the living, too,” Gars told me. “Course, you'll also sense stuff like grass and even the ground, so it'll take practice to detect just what or who you wanna find.”

Wait, so I'll be able to do that crazy I-can-feel-you-with-my-mind shit master swordsman can do in anime and stuff, but without even using any Skills? That's

nuts.

Of course, I doubted I'd be able to pull anything like that off in my pre-evolved body. It was probably only possible because I had such a high baseline to work off of.

"But now that you got a feel for Life Energy, why don't you fight those Phantoms off? Just put what you can feel right into your attacks or spells."

"Okay... How do I do that?"

"Gut feeling."

"Seriously?!"

First, I have to "get a feel for it," and now I just do it with a gut feeling?! This isn't beginner-friendly at all!

"There's gotta be something to it, right?" I asked Gars nervously. "Like a trick or something?"

He shrugged. "Hell if I know. I could just do it, no questions asked."

"Damn you and your genius!"

He couldn't be less helpful if he tried! How am I supposed to kill Phantoms like this?!

"Eee..."

The one in front shot a laser at me.

"Shit, don't just attack outta the blue like that! I could've gotten hurt!"

"Eee..."

"I said, stop attacking! Please?! Didn't your parents ever tell you not to eye-laser people?!"

I dodged the rays one after the other, bending in all sorts of weird ways to avoid getting hit.

"Impressive," I could hear Dad say. "He's trying to teach manners to a Phantom."

Mom chuckled. "I didn't know my little Seiichi wanted to be a stuntman."

“No! That’s not it, Dear!”

“An acrobat, then?”

“Of course not!”

“Eee...”

“Jeez, can you stop?! I’m trying to have a conversation here!”

Zeanos shook his head exasperatedly. “What do you think a Phantom is, Seiichi-dono?”

Great point!

As awkward of a timing as it was, though, I realized I never actually told my parents what I wanted from my future. Actually, I was too busy being picked on from all angles to put that much thought into the topic at all.

What would I want to do if I were still living back on Earth now?

If I were asked what I wanted to be as an adult back then, I wouldn’t have been able to answer at all, and the conversation would probably change to what I was doing just then.

Not that thinking about it now will do anything for me.

“So?” I pressed, bending over backward to dodge a laser. “Anyone got a tip for me, or will I just have to keep dodging this thing forever?”

Abel paused for a moment, losing himself in thought. “To be honest, I’m not sure I can describe it beyond just doing it.”

Anna nodded. “They’re right. Life Energy is like your will to live, so you just... will it to work, I guess.”

“Just give it a whirl!” Gars encouraged me. “And don’t worry—if you fail, we’ll bail you out!”

“Uh... Great.”

I was still confused, but the bit about willing it to work made some sense on some level. I decided to just give it a shot.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

I tensed up my whole body. It didn't feel like it was quite on the mark, but it was the closest I could come up with.

No way this is gonna work, though. It'd be way too eas—

"Eee?!"

"Eee! Eeeeeeeee!!"

Just as I thought that, though, my body practically exploded with energy. Both the Phantoms screeched in surprise before getting wiped out of existence.

I stared ahead blankly, trying to process what happened. "What the what?"

Gars grinned at me. "See? I knew you could pull it off!"

"Instead of channeling that power into an attack, you just emitted enough raw Life Energy to obliterate them directly." Lucius-san chuckled. "You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

I was in no laughing mood.

I OBLITERATED them?! How?! Nothing I did could even scratch them before, but now I just wiped them off the face of the Underworld without even trying to?!

Abel and the others started squinting and sweating at the sight of me.

"This's some crazy Life Energy," Gars muttered.

Abel nodded. "Remember, this is only the *excess* power."

"Yeah," Anna said in awe. "It must be so much stronger inside him."

Liliana nodded. "Anything emanating from him now would be what his body doesn't need to function properly. There shouldn't be this much, and it *definitely* shouldn't be strong enough to kill Phantoms he's not even touched."

"You sure you're human?" Gars asked. I couldn't tell if he was joking.

That's what I wanna know! How come my dumb body is such an overachiever?! Like, sure, my Status would support this, but c'mon! This is just cruel!

From her safe vantage point, Naturliana-san's jaw dropped. "I never would've... Do you know your Life Energy is similar to what you'd find in nature?"

"You think so?" Marie-san asked. "All I could tell was the size and thickness of it."

"That's normal," the aproned demonkin reassured her. "But I used to work at a flower shop, so I'm more sensitive to this kind of thing than most. That's why I was so surprised to feel that same kind of Life Energy from him."

Marie-san nodded. "That makes sense."

The more Naturliana-san said, though, the more confused I was about her.

A flower shop? Seriously, what kind of fate could be tying us together?

"Did you hear that, Seiichi?" Mom chuckled. "You're just like nature!"

Dad nodded seriously. "And just like nature, we all need you. That's my boy!"

"Th-That's not true! I mean, yeah, I'm your kid, but..."

I'm not that important, honest! I'm normal... God, I wish I could think that with a straight face!

Zeanos nodded approvingly. "Very good. Do you have a feel for how you might use it in combat now?"

"Maybe, but how the hell do I control it?!"

Sure, it works wonders against those Phantom things, but I'm not supposed to just... explode at them, right? I wish I could just use it normally!

He nodded understandingly. "Let's continue with your training, then; but to be honest, you could likely slay the Phantom King as you are now."

Why even bother training, then?!

Nonetheless, I followed Zeanos's instructions, slowly but surely honing my Life Energy against the Phantoms.

Chapter 19: The Academy Without Seiichi

That shithead Demioros just told me what happened, and I—Altria Grem—was overcome with anxiety.

Seiichi was dead.

My head felt all fuzzy, and I couldn't even think straight, let alone figure out what the hell I should do.

The naked creep flashed me a crooked grin. "Well? How does your despair taste? And don't assume this is the end. Your misery has just—"

"Shut the hell up!" shouted a voice from beside me, and somebody lashed out to boot Seiichi's killer in the head.

"Gwegh?!"

"Huh?"

I turned to see Agnos there, his breathing rough and agitated, with his arms folded firmly across his chest.

"How dare you?!" he snarled.

"What are you—" Demioros was suddenly cut off by Agnos's boot lodging itself in his face for a second time.

"Shut the fuck up!"

"G-Gh... You miserable cretin! You'll pay for that!"

"Will he, now?" Blud strolled over to join us, a frigid hostility in his voice. "You can barely drag yourself through the dirt. How could you make us 'pay' for anything?" His eyes grew a little more distant as he looked at where Seiichi had been mere moments before. "That man was always something of an oddity, wasn't he...?"

“What did you say to me?!” Demioros hissed. “How dare you talk to a Servant of the Wicked One Himself so condescendingly?!”

Blud’s eyes snapped back to him. “Didn’t you hear me? You can barely crawl through the mud and filth of the earth like the miserable worm you are. Has your hearing begun to fail you as well? No, surely, it’s your brain that has devolved into the most miserable, primitive state. Just speaking to you makes my tongue feel unclean.”

Damn, that’s a lot more than he said before.

Still, it seemed pretty in-character for Blud.

The maggot’s face went scarlet with rage, spittle flying from his mouth. “Not another word from you! Your only hope is *dead*! I slew him before your very eyes! Aren’t you scared? Aren’t you desperate?! Cry to me, *beg* for my forgiveness, release me from this infernal bondage, and I may let you go with a mere lifetime of despair!”

His every word was salt in my wounds. I bit my lip hard to hold in my emotions, but Agnos just glared down at him.

“Damn, you’re stupid.”

“Huh?” Demioros blinked up at them, not believing his ears.

“You think you killed that monster of a teacher so easily?” Blud nearly smiled. “I can’t even fathom such a notion.”

Agnos scoffed. “The hell do you think you can say any of that after he beat your ass so soundly?”

“Don’t be too harsh, Agnos—that *thing* has nothing but cheap words to soothe its misery. Honestly, I nearly pity it.”

“Right... Can’t accept the truth, huh? That’s just sad!”

Demioros’s mouth flapped open as if he were a fish out of water. “But... But...”

At that point, the rest of Class F drifted over to us.

“How dumb can you get?” Helen said with a sigh. “You got the worst of his strength, and you still think you’re somehow better than him? For your sake, I hope the rest of your Cult of the Wicked One or whatever isn’t as stupid as you.”

“That’s kinda mean!” Rachel protested. “But I don’t think Seiichi-sensei’s dead either~”

“He’s strong! Way too strong!” Flora boasted. “Like, he can’t even be human! That’s gotta be why he attracts cuties like Saria-san!”

Irene nodded. “No doubt. As perfect as I am, even I admit to suffering a perfect defeat at his hands. I’ve no doubt he’ll return from the Underworld any time now, stronger than ever.”

Flora chuckled. “Yeah, I can totally see that!”

As I looked around, I could see that none of them believed he was dead for a second. I wasn’t the only person who found it weird, though, since Beatrice-san seemed just as confused.

“But how can you be so sure?” she asked them. “Why do you all trust him so much?”

“He’s Seiichi-sensei,” the whole class replied at once.

That wasn’t a reason at all, but it sure snapped me outta my funk.

Yeah... Seiichi’s the kinda guy to pull off the impossible with a smile. How the hell can I call myself his girlfriend if I can’t even trust him to cheat death?

I could feel my trust hardening in my chest.

Saria, Lulune, and Origa wandered up to us, all three of them smiling.

“Yep, that’s right! Seiichi’s gonna be fine!”

“Honestly, when Master returns, I’m certain he’ll have brought the Underworld utterly under his control.”

“Mm. Seiichi-oniichan’s okay. He’ll be back soon with a smile.”

I wasn’t so sure about Lulune’s claim, but they all believed in him as much as the others.



“C’mon, Beatrice-neesan! He saved us all! You gotta know how amazing he was for that!”

“Well, yes, but—”

“So you saw it too, right? It’s only fair that you trust him then!”

She started in surprise at Agnos’ words, but her expression quickly melted into a smile.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. We’d best get ourselves together, then, so that we may welcome him home at any time.”

Agnos grinned. “That’s the spirit!”

Beatrice-san’s smile grew a little wider. “In that case, we’d best follow his instructions and begin studying for your exams.”

He fell weakly to his knees. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

So, he hates studying, huh? Can’t say that’s a surprise.

“Why?!” Agnos pleaded. “Can’t we at least wait ‘til the Clash of Classes is over?! Why do we have to study now?!”

“How could we possibly continue the tournament under these circumstances? Even if it isn’t cancelled outright, it’ll have to be postponed.”

“WHYYYYYYYYYYYYY?!”

“I’ll give you a hand with studying,” I suggested. “Don’t know how helpful I’ll be, ‘course...”

“Oh, I’d love the assistance!” Beatrice-san reassured me.

“YOU SCUM! How dare you ignore me?!”

I turned back to the asshat. His eyes were bloodshot with insane rage as he kicked and flailed against his restraints.

“I’ll drag each and every one of you into the depths of despair myself!” he hissed.

At that point, Blud gave him a strange look, and a moment later, his eyes widened.

“Hehe... Hehehehe!”

“What?!” the pervert snapped. “Stop laughing!”

Blud only looked down on him coolly. “Why shouldn’t I? It’s hilarious. If you want to know why, well, look at your Status.”

“What are you talking about?!” the idiot snapped back, but he readily did as he was told. He stopped to stare at it for a long moment, his face going blank. “... What?”

I watched him check it repeatedly, but he grew progressively more desperate each time.

“Wh-What? What on... How? I-I don’t understand. I don’t understand! What is this? What happened to me? Where did my Status go?!”

At that point, I was starting to get just as curious, and I used Analysis on him. I wasn’t at all prepared for what I saw.

DEMIOROS VANISSHE	
RACE: Human	
SEX: Male	
JOB: Scum	
AGE: 28	LEVEL: 0 [FIXED]
MANA: 0 [FIXED]	ATTACK: 0 [FIXED]
DEFENSE: 0 [FIXED]	AGILITY: 0 [FIXED]
M-ATTACK: 0 [FIXED]	M-DEFENSE: 0 [FIXED]
LUCK:	APPEARANCE: 0 [FIXED]

The Most Unfortunate Maggot in the World [FIXED]	
EQUIPMENT: • n/a	
SKILLS: • n/a	
MAGIC: • n/a	
TITLES: • n/a	
GOLD 0G	

That can't be right.

Not only did he have zeroes across the board, but his Luck was somehow worse. There was clearly no salvaging that wreck. I had no idea how I could see his Skills or Titles, since that wasn't normally visible.

How can this guy be a Servant or whatever?

He began violently shaking his head. "N-No... No, no, no, no, NO! This must be a mistake... Yes, it has to be!"

As he fervently tried to deny what he was seeing, Blud's grin only deepened until it was downright devilish.

"You can't believe it, can you? Let me tell you something else, then."

"H-Huh?"

"Stand." He dragged the shitbag to his feet. "Now look. Where did that beloved Mark of yours go?"

Sure enough, the Mark of the Servant tattoo on his chest was nowhere to be seen.

"Wh-What? Why? How is this possible?!"

“You poor, miserable creature,” Blud cooed, stroking his hair condescendingly with a sweet smile. “It looks like you’re a lowly human after all.”

I could feel a chill run down my spine, and even Agnos and the others looked kinda uneasy.

Is it just me, or does Blud seem like the bad guy now? Not that I feel bad for that creep, ‘course.

“You’re scarin’ me,” Agnos told him uncertainly.

Blud shook his head. “What, did you think I was some saint? After all he’s tormented and hurt us, don’t you think he deserves as much?”

“Well, maybe, but...”

“Besides, all I’ve done is point out the truth.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense.”

That’s all it takes to convince you?!

Apparently, though, Irene didn’t think Blud was going far enough, and she shook her head imperiously.

“You’re a true fool. Do you honestly believe that an avatar of perfection such as myself would give *you* my prized despair?”

Damn, Irene, you don’t have to kick him when he’s down!

“Now, now,” Barnabus-sama chided them, “that’ll be quite enough. You’ll break the poor man if you continue to treat him so—though I suppose he’s already broken. Hohoho!”

That’s brutal, Barnabus-sama!

I was pissed, too, to the point that it was taking all the self-control I had not to beat the living shit outta the guy. I wouldn’t just let him off the hook after claiming Seiichi was dead. Still, I knew it’d be dumb to pound the guy now. He could tell us a ton about his Cult of the Wicked One or whatever—they were clearly bad news.

The hell is the Wicked One? Do they mean the Demon King or something?

Still, it was clear we had to put this guy to use. I didn't want to think about what would happen if something like this happened again.

"Regardless, I shall take this ruffian into my custody," Barnabus-sama announced. "Beatrice-kun, everyone, please take some time to rest. It will take some time to restore the Academy to order, so refresh yourselves in the meantime. I will naturally grant you the time to visit your respective homes, should you choose to. It won't be an easy feat to reassure all the parents and guardians who witnessed that unfortunate display... Until later, then."

With that, he dragged the creep away, stopping to call for the woman who had invaded the Academy with him along the way. He was probably planning to get information from them both.

He's got it way harder than we do.

At the end of the day, the Clash of Classes was meant to show off what the kids learned to parents and nobles from all over the continent. Even with a good explanation, tons of people would be bitching at him to compensate them or pull their kids out of the Academy. He'd have a ton of apologizing to do before this mess was over.

After that, everyone decided to split up and head back to their dorms to rest. Word came around later that the Academy would be going on hiatus, and I could see a few students getting ready to head home for the break. Their parents were probably pissed over the whole affair, and I was probably seeing some of the kids for the last time. It was a serious mess, after all.

On top of that, there was Seiichi. Saria and the others weren't worried, and of course I believed he'd be back, but I still felt uneasy about it. As I lay on my dorm room's bed, I looked at the necklace he had given me and stroked the ring on my hand.

"That dumbass," I muttered, burying my face in my pillow. "The hell's he makin' me worry so much?"

He'd better make it up to us for puttin' us through this. H-He should, uh, take me out on another date for this. Where should we go, though? I'd like to try someplace fancier than last time. Maybe I'll do somethin' different with my hair... I hope he'll compliment me.

“Hehehe...”

I smiled at the thought of it. I had never felt about anyone like that before.

I mean, thinkin' about dates, about k-kissing...

Thinking of my first kiss, I touched my lips and could feel my face get hot. Then, face buried deep in my pillow, I kicked my legs and dreamed.

To be continued in *The Fruit of Evolution: Before I knew it, my life had it made!*

Vol. 7

Back Matter

Author: Miku I'm a university student, and I love karaoke and reading. Flawed as it may be, I sincerely hope you enjoy my work. (May 2017)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (May 2017)



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